

25¢

FIFTEEN

DEC.



# WESTERN

## TALES

15  
STORIES

25  
CENTS

### FAST MAN- FAST GRAVE!

*A NOVEL OF GUNSMOKE  
RECKONING*  
by PHILIP  
KETCHUM

SHAD  
COLLINS

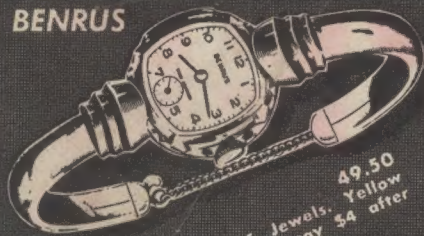
MURRAY  
LEINSTER

MANY OTHERS

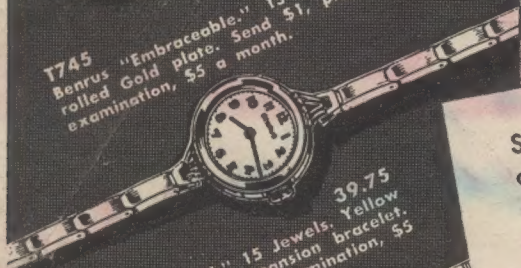




**BENRUS**



**T745**  
Benrus "Embraceable." 15 Jewels. Yellow rolled Gold plate. Send \$1, pay \$4 after examination, \$5 a month. **49.50**



**T630**  
Benrus "Lady Beall." 15 Jewels. Yellow rolled Gold plate. Expansion bracelet. Send \$1, pay \$3 after examination, \$5 a month. **39.75**



**O761**  
Benrus "Ellsworth." 17 Jewels. Yellow rolled Gold plate. Basketweave bracelet. Send \$1, pay \$4.50 after examination, \$5 a month. **55.00**



**O682**  
Benrus "Poodle." 15 Jewels. Yellow rolled Gold plate. Expansion bracelet. Send \$1, pay \$3 after examination, \$5 a month. **39.75**



**1 1/2 CARAT GENUINE ZIRCON**  
2 side Zircons; 5 Zircon Wedding Band. 14K yellow Gold. Send \$1, pay \$3.25 after examination, \$5 a month. **F269/E745 42.50**

**SEND ONLY**

**\$1**

**WE WILL SEND ANY ITEM YOU CHOOSE FOR APPROVAL UNDER OUR MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE.**

Simply indicate your selection on the coupon below and forward it with \$1 and a brief note giving your age, occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. We will open an account for you and send your selection to you subject to your examination. If completely satisfied, pay the Expressman the required Down Payment and the balance in easy payments of \$5 a month. Otherwise, return your selection and your \$1 will be refunded.

**SEND FOR FREE CATALOG**



**A303/C203 87.50**  
7 Diamond Engagement Ring, matching 9 Diamond Wedding Band. 14K yellow Gold. Send \$1, pay \$7.75 after examination, \$5 a month.

**D219 59.50**  
Man's Diamond Ring with 2 Diamonds, center simulated Ruby. 14K yellow Gold. Send \$1, pay \$5 after examination, \$5 a month.

Prices Include Federal Tax

**SEND \$1 WITH COUPON — PAY BALANCE OF DOWN PAYMENT AFTER EXAMINATION**

L. W. Sweet, 25 West 14th St. (Dept. P8)  
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find \$1 deposit. Send me No. \_\_\_\_\_

Price \$\_\_\_\_\_. After examination, I

agree to pay \$\_\_\_\_\_ and \$5.00 monthly

thereafter until full price is paid, otherwise I'll

return selection and you will refund my dollar.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

**L.W.Sweet**

MAIL ORDER DIVISION FINLAY STRAUS, INC.  
25 W. 14th St., NEW YORK 11, N. Y. Dept. P8



“  
He’s going places,  
that boy!”



“Fred came here as a machinist three years ago. Not too much experience, but with a yen to learn and plenty of ambition. He caught on quickly — so quickly, in fact, that I got a little curious.

“Sure enough, it wasn’t long before I got a report on him from the International Correspondence Schools. He had enrolled in an I.C.S. Shop Practice course and was making better-than-average grades. On the job, he applied what he learned. In fact, he ‘showed up’ many of our more experienced machinists. It paid off.

“When we needed someone to study and recommend the shop equipment for our new plant, Fred got the job. He’s on ‘salary’ now, working here in the front office. When we move, he’ll be put in charge of maintenance and repairs. It’s a big step up, but he’s trained for it — and in this business, *it’s the trained men who get ahead!*”

Thousands of successful “Freds” have acquired their all-important Shop Practice training from the world-famous International Correspondence Schools. If advancement appeals to you, lose no time in following their lead. You can study an I.C.S. Shop Practice course in your spare time — at low cost.

Mark and mail the coupon — it’s your bid for a well-paid, responsible place in the competitive world of tomorrow.



## INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3278-Y, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

### Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses

- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Chemistry Courses
  - ☐ Chemical Engineering
  - ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
  - ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
  - ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
  - ☐ Petroleum Refining
  - ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
- ☐ Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
  - ☐ Architecture
  - ☐ Architectural Drafting
  - ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
  - ☐ Building Estimating
  - ☐ Civil Engineering
  - ☐ Coal Mining
  - ☐ Contracting and Building
  - ☐ Highway Engineering
  - ☐ Lumber Dealer
  - ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
  - ☐ Sanitary Engineering
  - ☐ Structural Drafting

### Structural Engineering Surveying and Mapping Communications Courses

- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Courses
  - ☐ Electrical Drafting
  - ☐ Electrical Engineering
  - ☐ Electric Light and Power
  - ☐ Lighting Technician
  - ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines Courses
  - ☐ Auto Technician
  - ☐ Diesel-Electric
  - ☐ Diesel Engines
  - ☐ Aeronautical Engineer, Jr.
  - ☐ Aircraft Drafting
  - ☐ Flight Engineer
  - ☐ Forging
  - ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Gas Engines
- ☐ Founary Work

### Industrial Engineering Industrial Metallurgy Machine Shop Mechanical Drafting Mechanical Engineering Mold-Loft Work Patternmaking—Wood, Metal Reading Shop Blueprints Sheet-Metal Drafting Sheet-Metal Worker Ship Drafting Tool Designing Toolmaking Welding—Gas and Electric Railroad Courses

- ☐ Air Brake
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam Engineering Courses
  - ☐ Boilermaking
  - ☐ Combustion Engineering
  - ☐ Engine Running
  - ☐ Marine Engineering
  - ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Car Inspector

### Textile Courses

- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

### Business and Academic Courses

- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Arithmetic
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ French
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Stenography

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Home Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Present Position \_\_\_\_\_ Working Hours \_\_\_\_\_ A.M. to \_\_\_\_\_ P.M.

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.  
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.



# FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 14, No. 3



DECEMBER, 1947

## Three Smashing Novels

1. **FAST MAN—FAST GUN**.....*Philip Ketchum* 6  
"Welcome to Death Basin, stranger! Our graves are dug for the quick—by them that's quicker!"
2. **RED MAN'S RECKONING**.....*Lee E. Wells* 34  
"Red man and white man are brothers under war paint, mister—but nothin' will cover yellow!"
3. **DEATH IS MY HERITAGE**.....*Kenneth Fowler* 72  
It's easier to kill a man—than to bury his memory!

## Two Big Novelettes

4. **BY THE GUNS FORGOT**.....*Murray Leinster* 56  
Buck Reynolds, owlhoot, wanted to grow flowers—on a worse man's grave!
5. **BLOOD BEFORE BULLETS**.....*Frank Morris* 116  
Home and family to Steve Harron meant putting blood before bullets—and spilling it fighting for men he hated!

## Short Stories

6. **BOOTHILL CALL**.....*Joe Archibald* 26  
There's more'n one way to kill—but one is all you need!
7. **GUN CRAZY**.....*James Shaffer* 48  
They weren't particular at Rock Springs. They'd take Johnny King—dead or alive!
8. **DEAD TRAIL'S END**.....*Bryce Walton* 67  
"Until death do us part—" meant little to Black Jack, until he met a woman who was won—or lost—on the speed of a bullet!
9. **DEEP—LIKE A GRAVE**.....*Al Storm* 88  
Honest Slim Keith earned his monicker—although it took him until the day he died!
10. **THE DUDE GROWS UP**.....*Shad Collins* 100  
Two guns won't make a man—till he learns to look at the smoking end of one of 'em!
11. **GUN GHOSTS NEVER DIE**.....*Ray Gaulden* 110  
A lobo past will live as long as a man—but it will not follow him to glory!

## Departments and Features

12. **CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ**... "stripper," Western style...*H. McCord* 25
13. **NOT SO GAY BLADE**..... blood and Bowie .....*J. W. Q.* 85
14. **TALES OF THE OLD WEST**... The Prophet's Rebellion .....*Lee* 86
15. **BADLANDS BARGAIN**... Cattle Kate .....*Raymond W. Spears* 93
16. **POWDERSMOKE PILGRIM**... John Wesley Hardin ..*Frank Ward* 105

Published monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter August 22, 1945, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$3.00; other countries 75c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.





Permission Peter Arne  
© The New Yorker  
Magazine, Inc.

**PUZZLE:** *Station Scene, 1957. Find the man who is getting a steady income from U. S. Savings Bonds. He was smart enough to start buying, back in 1947.*

Of all the ways of saving up a tidy sum of money, one of the *easiest* and *safest* ways is to invest your money in U. S. Bonds.

You can buy Bonds either through the Payroll Savings Plan at your place of business—or if the Payroll Plan is not available to you,

but you *do* have a checking account, through the Bond-a-Month Plan at your local bank.

Both ways repay you \$4 for every \$3 you save, by the time your Bonds mature. Choose the sum you can afford—and start saving today!

**Save the easy, automatic way  
— with U.S. Savings Bonds**

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation  
with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.





By  
PHILIP  
KETCHUM



*"Welcome to Death Basin, stranger!  
Our graves are dug for the quick—  
by them that's quicker!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death Basin

THEY had been on the trail a long time. The cattle showed it. They were, thin, gaunt, hardly more than skin and bones. The men in the trail herd showed it too—lean, hardened and with red-rimmed eyes, not one of them weighing within twenty pounds of what he had weighed when leaving Texas. All were bearded, for there had been no time nor incentive to shave. All were ragged.





---

"That's right," said a man's voice. "Stay where you are. Don't try to pull your gun. . . ."

---

How far they had come none of them knew. They had lost track of the days. It had been up from Texas, through the outlaw lands, along the Kansas border, south and west into New Mexico. Some said they were now in Arizona. Some remarked rather grimly that California lay just ahead. It had been a drive none of them would ever forget. They had fought off Indians and outlaws. They had conquered flood and stampede. They had

pushed their way through swamps, timbered hills and across the barren, arid sands of the desert country. The herd had numbered more than three thousand head when they started the drive. There had been an even dozen men in the crew. Now there were scarcely a thousand cattle and the crew tallied seven. The long trail had taken its toll.

This was a rugged country they were in now, a country of barren, rolling hills and



with few streams. For a week they had not cut any road or come close to any town. Somewhere ahead was supposed to be the wide and fertile Utah basin where water was plentiful and the grass was good; where the long drive would be over and the men could sleep at night and not have to worry about a stampede, an outlaw raid or Indian trouble.

Somewhere dead ahead was the Utah, if there was such a place. The men were beginning to doubt it.

Deep in these hills and in a long, narrow valley watered by a sluggish stream they made another in their long series of night camps. Grub was getting low. The evening meal was far from satisfying. The coffee had a thin, muddy taste. Jerd Cameron stared bleakly at Henry Gunther who was eating with a hungry relish, eating fast and hard. Gunther went after his meals as he went after every other job which faced him. He never held back. There was a drive to the man which seemed never to slacken, never to bend from a course, once it was set. If had brought them this far. It had whipped them on, regardless of odds or obstacles. Jerd wondered, as he had often wondered, how much more these men would take from Gunther, how much more he could take. There was a bottom to every man and these six who rode with Gunther were close to that.

Gunther got to his feet. He poured a second cup of coffee from the blackened pot, swilled it down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and grunted. He was a tall man, heavy, broad-shouldered. He stood with his feet wide spread, his head poked forward, his long arms swinging at his sides, arms powerful enough to squeeze the life from a man. A bushy black beard hid the square stubborn line of his jaw. Dark eyes squinted, he stared ahead at the seemingly endless rolling hills.

"Saddle up, Jerd," he said abruptly. "We'll ride."

Jerd Cameron finished his coffee. He stood up, rubbed the bristling beard on his chin and nodded. He was as tall a man as Gunther but not as heavy. He had a thin, wiry frame, thin, angular features.

"Where do we ride?" he asked.

"West," said Henry Gunther. "West to the Utah. We're near the rim."

The others were listening to this and Clem Cody laughed briefly. "How do you know we're near the rim, Gunther?" he demanded. "Ever been here before?"

Gunther turned his dark glance on the man who had asked this question. "I said we were near the rim," he grated. "Want to argue the matter?"

Clem Cody bit his lips. He was a stoop-

shouldered man, older than his forty-five years. His hand edged toward his gun, then fell away. A hopeless, bitter, defeated look showed in his eyes. In this look was the knowledge that if he touched his gun he was dead. He had seen men, faster than he was, badgered into drawing on Henry Gunther. He had seen them die.

"When we get to the Utah," said Gunther, "You can draw your money and quit. Try quitting before then and you'll draw your money in lead."

Henry Gunther meant it, and everyone there knew he meant it. There was a ruthlessness in Gunther which matched his drive, which was as hard and unbending as steel.

Jerd Cameron turned away. He saddled a fresh horse which hadn't been ridden during the day's drive, and after he had mounted he built a smoke, rolling the tobacco firmly with steady, deliberate fingers. Gunther turned to speak to Foxy Williams, then angled for the remuda and saddled up, picking a stringy, rawhide tough gray as his mount. He motioned to Jerd and headed west. Jerd Cameron followed him, resenting Gunther but at the same time envying his indomitable strength.

AN EARLY moon made it almost as bright as day. They rode west in as nearly a straight line as possible and within two hours Gunther reined up on the edge of the rim. Jerd pulled in close beside him and stared over what he knew was the Utah basin. It spread out below them as far as the eye could see. The rim of the basin curved to the north and west. To the south it lowered into the meadows. To the west were high, snow-capped mountains, whose streams watered this grassy land. Far ahead were the clustered lights of a town.

"A two day's drive and we're home," said Henry Gunther.

His voice was heavy with satisfaction. A tight smile showed on his lips.

"People already live here," Jerd mentioned. "There might not be room for us."

"Then, we'll make room."

Jerd Cameron sat quietly on his horse, staring out over the basin. He didn't know this country, didn't know how completely it was settled. There might be no trouble at all when Gunther moved in. On the other hand, all this land below them might be claimed by those who were here. There might be none of it open for sale for settlement.

"They will make room for us," said Henry Gunther once more. "They will make room or we will take it."

Jerd Cameron said nothing.

"Well?" Gunther asked sharply.

Jerd shrugged his shoulders. He still had nothing to say.



"We'll ride into town," said Henry Gunther. "Come on."

They had been following no trail but the drop from the rim was gentle and offered no difficulties. Gunther still led, as was always his habit. He was never sociable, had never been a man to waste words in idle, friendly talk, and Jerd Cameron, used to his ways, followed him in silence.

A strange pair, these two men. Gunther, the older by ten years, was dominant, the stronger, yet in Jerd Cameron there was an unbending strength which had never been fully challenged. On a score of occasions along the trail these two men had clashed, and usually it had been Jerd who had backed down. At such times, however, it had been with a reservation which had never accorded Gunther a complete victory. Some time a clash would come between these two men from which neither could turn away. They both recognized this—and the time was near. They both could feel it.

It was cooler in the basin than it had been beyond the rim, Jerd pulled his coat tighter as they angled across country toward the lights they had seen. He was twenty-eight but he felt older. For a dozen years he had been on his own. Four of those years he had wasted, moving from job to job through Texas. Four he had spent with Jeb Stuart, riding for a now lost cause. Four years he had used up working for Henry Gunther and these he wondered about.

Why he had stayed with Gunther he would never know. The challenge of the man's personality might explain a part of it. A perverse streak of his nature might explain the rest. He hated Gunther but at the same time felt the attraction of Gunther's strength. In so far as he could stand against Gunther he knew the measure of himself.

This, if it were the Unitah basin, was a good cattle country. As they had dropped down from the rim Jerd had marked the courses of several streams as indicated by marching lines of trees. The grass was almost fetlock high. They soon passed cattle, sleek fat cattle, so different from the skeleton herd they were driving that they seemed a different breed. Far to the left and later on, far to the right, Jerd saw the lights of ranch houses. It would be strange if a cattleman's paradise, such as this seemed to be, wasn't completely settled.

As this thought came back to him a scowl settled on his face and he looked soberly at Henry Gunther. He wondered how far Gunther would go to make a place for himself in this basin, and his knowledge of the man held an answer. There was no limit to what Gunther would do to achieve his goal. There were no rules he recognized.

THE town was a greater distance from the rim than it had seemed and it was close to midnight before they reached it. If this were Unitah, it lay in a gentle bend of a shallow stream and was half circled by the trees marking the course of the creek. Trees grew in the town, as well, a silent town this late at night with none of the houses showing any lights. There was a short main street and business district where several saloons were still open. A board walk lined each side of the street. In places the walk became the porch of a store and was roofed. The stores were separate buildings set close together. A few had square false fronts.

A dozen tie-rails lined the street. Three lonely saddled horses were at the tie-rail in front of what was called the Back Boy Saloon. Two other saloons showed lights. One was the Unitah and the other was the High Rim. Between these two was the Boston store and across from the Back Boy saloon was the Unitah Bank and the hotel. Some of the buildings were unnamed. Farther up the street was a building with a peaked entrance which might be a court-house. They had passed a livery stable and saddle and blacksmith shop at the near end of the street.

Gunther pulled up at the tie-rail in front of the Back Boy saloon. He dismounted stiffly, adjusted his gunbelt and waited impatiently for Jerd to join him. The usual, tight scowl was on his face.

"We'll have a drink," he said flatly. "Maybe it's too late to do any business. We might have to wait over until tomorrow."

Jerd shrugged his shoulders. He followed Gunther without comment into the saloon. It was like any other saloon, a bar along one side of the room, tables on the other side. Five men were playing poker at one of the tables. The bartender stood watching the game. He was bald-headed, fat, and wore a dirty apron. He left the game and came to the bar. He ducked under it and faced Jerd and Henry Gunther. He looked at them curiously. Jerd could understand his look. The story of the long trail they had followed—was evident on his face and on Gunther's and could be read in their worn clothing.

"What'll it be, gentlemen?" asked the bartender.

"Whiskey," said Gunther, "and no hogwash. The best you have."

The bartender frowned. He reached for a bottle and two glasses and set them on the bar. Gunther poured a drink and downed it and poured another before pushing the bottle toward Jerd. This inconsideration of his was partly typical, partly studied. Jerd's lips thinned across his face. He poured his drink.

"You fellows look as though you've come a long ways," said the bartender.



"We have," Gunther replied. "All the way from Texas with a trail herd."

The poker game had stopped. Gunther's voice had been loud enough to carry to the players. What he had said seemed to interest them.

"You mean you've brought cattle all the way from Texas to the Unitah?" asked the bartender.

"To within a few miles of the east rim," Gunther admitted.

One of the men who had been playing poker got to his feet and came up to the bar. He was a short, stocky man, neatly dressed. His boots, the gun he was wearing and the tan on his pinched face indicated that he was a cattleman and not a man living in town. He looked close to fifty.

"Did I hear correctly?" he asked Gunther. "Have you actually got a trail herd near the rim?"

"That's correct," Gunther admitted.

"My name's Wright," said the man. "I've a ranch here in the basin. I could run more cattle on it. How many head in your herd?"

"Maybe twelve hundred."

"How much do you want for them?"

Gunther shook his head. "They're not for sale."

"Not for sale?" said Wright, frowning.

"What do you plan on doing with them?"

"I'm going to run them myself."

"Where?"

"Here in the Unitah."

Wright was still frowning. "I don't know where you'll find a place. No one I know of plans on selling out. There's land south of here but it's pretty dry. I reckon you could try it."

Henry Gunther downed his second drink and poured another.

"Maybe you didn't hear me," he said slowly. "I'm moving into the Unitah. I'm running my cattle here."

Wright stiffened. His eyes narrowed. He moistened his lips. "Just what do you mean by that, mister? How are you moving in?"

Jerd turned so he could watch the three men at the poker table. Two were standing up. One man still held his seat. The men who were standing were rigid. A tight, strained look showed on their faces.

"How I move in," Gunther was saying, "is up to you fellows here. I'm not a man to beat around the bush. I'll buy in or you can all move over a little and make room for me. Which will it be?"

Wright sucked in a long, slow breath. He started to turn away but as he moved back Gunther reached out, caught him by the shoulder and jerked him violently into the bar.

"Don't walk off from me," Gunther shouted. "I want to know—"

He didn't finish his sentence. A half smothered cry had broken from Wright's throat. The man straightened up. His hand clawed for his gun, jerking it from its holster. His gun was half lifted before Gunther drew but nothing could match the lightning smooth motion of Gunther's arm. There was only one shot. Gunther's. It smashed Wright high in the chest just below the throat. The man stiffened, the shock of this showing in his face. He tottered forward. He sprawled suddenly to the floor.

For a moment there wasn't a sound in the room. Jerd Cameron's gun was out, covering the men at the poker table, warning them back. One of them, a tall, thin, sandy-haired fellow about Jerd's age was staring boldly at Gunther.

"You didn't have to do that," he said huskily. "You didn't have to kill him."

"Maybe you'd like to do something about it," Gunther snapped.

The young man paled. Jerd could read in his face the struggle he was having. Perspiration showed around his lips and on his forehead. "You didn't have to kill him," he said again.

Gunther shrugged his shoulders. He turned toward the door. When he reached it he stopped and looked back.

"I'm taking a room in the hotel for the night," he said clearly. "If anyone wants me, I'll be over there. Come on, Jerd."

Jerd Cameron holstered his gun and headed for the door. He almost hoped that someone in this room would start something but no one did.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hell Trail Hombre

JERD didn't sleep well that night. The wall bunk in the hotel room seemed more lumpy than the ground he had been sleeping on for months. He was up with the first gray light of the dawn and had a cigarette as he sat in a barrel chair at the window. Later on, standing in the center of the room, his hand slipped down and whipped up his gun. It was a quick draw, lightning fast. It might even be as fast as Gunther's but he wasn't sure. That nagging doubt lay always in the back of his mind.

As the sun came up he heard Gunther stirring about in the next room and a little while later he moved out to the hotel porch and waited. Gunther joined him there after a few minutes. Gunther looked as he always looked, neither tired nor rested. The hint of a scowl was always on his face, at times deepening with his feelings. It was not heavy this morn-



ing as he stood at the edge of the hotel porch and glanced up and down the street.

"A nice town, Jerd, from the looks of it," he said finally. "I'm going to like it here in the Unitah."

He spoke as though the matter of his residence in the basin had already been approved, as though no problems lay before him.

"Let's try that restaurant next to the bank," he added. "It looks open."

There were no others on the street this early. No stores had yet opened but a thin column of white smoke was lifting from the chimney of the restaurant. Jerd shrugged his shoulders as though where they ate or when, was of little importance. He walked with Gunther toward the restaurant.

They had breakfast and afterwards walked back to the hotel and sat on the porch. They watched Unitah come to life, Gunther smoking one cigarette after another as he waited. There was something grim and inevitable in Gunther's manner. There was a boldness in his presence here in town. There was defiance in his manner.

Jerd Cameron matched Gunther, cigarette for cigarette. He watched the stores being opened and he noticed the way men looked at him and Gunther. Quite early, a crowd rode in from the ranch district and gathered at the sheriff's office. As the minutes piled up, more men rode into town. They kept away from the hotel but they eyed him and Gunther from a distance and no glance was friendly.

"The wolves are gathering," said Henry Gunther, and there was a grim note in his voice. "We will settle this in a hurry."

Jerd Cameron made no answer.

"Do you still feel like you felt last night?" Gunther asked.

Jerd nodded his head. "I still feel the same. There was no reason to kill the man."

"You have the heart of a chicken," Gunther growled.

"Maybe."

Gunther turned to face him. "Where do you stand, Cameron? Just where do you stand?"

"When I break with you, Gunther," Jerd Cameron answered, "I'll let you know."

"But you'll break with me."

"Of course. Didn't you always know it?"

Henry Gunther had been sitting in a chair on the porch. He came slowly to his feet, his scowl now darkening his face. "Try it Cameron," he said thickly. "Try it this morning."

Jerd Caremon moistened his lips. He shook his head. "Save it, Gunther," he answered. "Save it for the sheriff. Here he comes."

Gunther turned his head. He stared down the street. The men who had gathered in front of the sheriff's office were coming toward the hotel. They numbered more than

a dozen. The tall, broad-shouldered man leading them wore a star on his vest.

Gunther remained standing. He rubbed his hands together. He looked, Jerd decided, as though he meant to enjoy this. His lips were pressed tightly together. There was a sharp light in his eyes.

The crowd coming up the street from the sheriff's office stopped at the edge of the hotel porch. It was a grim and silent crowd. The sheriff, a little in front of the others, touched his gun, loosening it in its holster. He stared straight at Gunther.

"Are you the fellow who killed Ed Wright?" he asked bluntly.

"I killed a man who pulled a gun on me last night," Gunther answered. "Since when has that been a crime?"

"I hear you forced the fight," said the sheriff.

"I didn't make him go for his gun."

The sheriff was scowling. "I know you didn't," he admitted. "I still think it was murder. If I could prove it you would be under arrest. I understand you've got a herd of cattle just beyond the rim."

"That's right."

"And that you mean to move into the Unitah basin."

Gunther nodded.

"Where is your range?" asked the sheriff.

A brief, humorless smile touched Gunther's lips. "I have no range," he answered. "I'll buy one or take one, whichever is necessary."

The sheriff shook his head. "There is no land in the Unitah for sale."

Henry Gunther leaned forward. He pointed to the east. "Beyond that rim," he declared, "I have more than a thousand head of cattle. I've driven them more miles than a man can count. I don't mean to sell them or give them away. Wright admitted his land was not overstocked. There's room for me here and I'm moving in. I'll buy land or take it. Make the future easy on yourself."

"You'll not move in here," said the sheriff, "without land."

"Then get me land."

"There's no land for sale."

Gunther turned and glanced at Jerd Cameron. He said, "Come on, Jerd. We'll waste no more time."

"You'll not drive your cattle into the valley," said the sheriff grimly.

"Try and stop me," Gunther challenged. "I'm moving in."

His hand was on his gun. He looked absolutely unafraid. He had an assurance which was superb and again Jerd knew an envy of him as he arose and stood at Gunther's shoulder, facing this sullen, angry crowd. Technically Gunther was in the clear.



He had not reached for his gun, the night before, until after Wright had drawn. This gave him the protection of a plea of self-defense. Though he had said he would move his herd into the basin, he had not yet done so. Legally he could not be touched.

"I warn you, Gunther," said the sheriff. "We'll tolerate no range grab in the Unitah."

"Then find me land I can buy," Gunther grated.

He stepped from the porch and turned down the street toward the livery stable. Jerd walked with him. No attempt was made to stop him.

**A**RIG had just pulled up in front of the livery stable. The man driving it climbed to the ground and turned to help a woman down. The man was slender, middle-aged. The woman was probably in her early twenties. Her skin was nicely tanned. She was dark-haired and stood very straight, an obvious pride in her bearing.

Jerd noticed these people as he and Gunther approached them. He noticed the girl particularly. He couldn't have helped it. She had stiffened. There was a blazing hatred in her eyes as she stared at him and beyond him at Gunther.

As they drew even with them the girl turned suddenly toward the man, jerked the gun from his holster and swung around, lifting it toward Gunther.

"Martha!" the man shouted. "Don't—"

Jerd Cameron took a quick step toward the girl, slapping up at her arm. The gun exploded, its bullet screaming high in the air. Jerd reached for the gun. He twisted it from the girl's hand, but not easily. There was more strength in her than he had suspected. When he stepped away he lifted one hand to his cheek. She had struck him there during the struggle for the gun and the blow had been solid.

"Sorry, Miss," Jerd heard himself saying. "These things can be dangerous."

He turned and handed the gun back to the man who owned it, a man whose dark, scowling look was hard and bitter.

There was a flaming color in the girl's face. Her breath was coming fast. Her fists were clenched. She swung toward the man, "Give me that gun," she demanded, "Give it to me."

The man shook his head. "That's not the way, Martha. We live by law in the basin."

"Where was your law when father was killed?" flared the girl. "I don't care for your law."

The man bit his lips. He had no answer.

Henry Gunther was standing to one side, a sardonic smile on his face. He made a mock bow in the direction of the girl. "I will ac-

commodate you by dying later, miss," he drawled. "Much later."

The girl's face was still flushed. Her dark eyes still held their anger. She didn't back away or show any indication of weakening.

Gunther chuckled. He turned and moved on toward the stable, almost swaggering. The girl watched him. She seemed hardly aware of Jerd Cameron, and after a momentary hesitation, Jerd turned on his heel and followed Gunther.

"Spunky kid, wasn't she," said Gunther as they saddled up. "Must be Wright's daughter."

Jerd had no comment to make. He pulled the saddle-cinch too tight, loosened it, and then mounted. When he rode out of the stable the girl and the man were gone.

They headed for the east rim, following a wagon road for some distance. At a fork in the road about five miles from Unitah they pulled up. A signpost here pointed south and east, marking the way to the Wright ranch. The range brand on the post was a Circle W. In the distance the ranch building could be seen.

"You know, this might be the place for us," Gunther mentioned. "They might sell out now that Wright's dead."

"They'll never sell to you," Jerd answered.

Gunther shrugged his shoulders. He looked narrowly at Jerd. "Maybe you think I'm all wrong," he said slowly. "Tell me this. What right have six men got to all the land in this basin?"

"Maybe there are sixteen," Jerd suggested.

"All right, sixteen then. What right have they got to keep the seventeenth man out? Wright admitted his range wasn't overstocked. There's room here for us, Jerd, and we're moving in, just as I told them."

"Did you have to kill a man to make room?" Jerd asked quietly.

"He drew on me, didn't he?"

"After you had mauled him."

"He still drew on me."

"You didn't have to kill him."

"Shut up!"

A tight smile touched Jerd's lips, almost a mocking smile. He sat easily in the saddle, feeling the tension of this moment, aware of its danger.

Gunther sucked his breath between his lips. "Let's ride," he said abruptly.

**T**HEY climbed gradually toward the rim and on its crest paused briefly and looked back. The day was clear. Below them, maybe fifty miles wide, lay the Unitah basin. It was perhaps that long, a green spot in this rugged country, well watered by tree lined streams, its lush meadows dotted with cattle.



"We've almost made it," said Henry Gunther. "It was a drive, Jerd, quite a drive."

Jerd Cameron could sense and could share the satisfaction Gunther's voice reflected. Whatever he might think of Gunther and whatever the future might hold for them, he had had his share in the drive. They were within reach of their goal. Nothing had stopped them. Storms, floods, Indians, outlaws, one adverse situation after another had been overcome. They had made it. Here was the Unitah basin.

In the late afternoon and within a day's drive of the rim they met the herd, still pushing west. Word of how close they were to the rim lifted the spirits of the crew. That night, for the first time in weeks there was friendly banter during evening chow and afterwards. Some of the tensions were breaking down. Even Clem Cody, ordinarily a bitter, silent man, unbent enough to chuckle at some of the talk.

Most that was said about the Unitah was said by Henry Gunther, and as he listened to the way Gunther built these men up to be prepared for trouble, Jerd grew increasingly silent. Gunther said nothing of having shot a man. The story of his talk with the sheriff in Unitah was colored the way he wanted it colored. It was a grass-rich basin, Gunther told his men. The folks already there were not anxious to give up any part of it. They wanted to hang on to more land than they could ever use.

"We'll blast our way if we have to," said Foxy Williams.

The others nodded.

"We're not turning back now," Don Throop growled. "We'll turn back for no one."

Across the fire, Henry Gunther's mocking eyes rested on Jerd Cameron. "That sounds fine," he nodded. "Only maybe Jerd doesn't agree. Jerd doesn't like the idea of pushing into the Unitah. Is that right, Jerd?"

An abrupt silence fell over the men gathered around the fire. The tensions which had been gone were suddenly back. Jerd felt as though the ground had been cut out from under him and he could reach no place for a solid foundation. He held a rigid, intent expression on his face, and the look was a dead give away. Gunther's cold, hard, challenging eyes were on him. The others glanced from him to Gunther and back again. They had always been aware of the antagonism between him and Gunther. They were increasingly aware of it now.

"Well, Jerd?" came Gunther's mocking voice. "Are you still chicken-hearted?"

Jerd reached for the stick lying in front of him and poked the fire. He stared above its jumping flames toward Gunther. The man was sitting cross-legged, his right hand out of

sight below his hip, close to his gun holster. His face was a little flushed. It had come. The moment Jerd had known he would some day have to face was here. He could read it in Gunther's look, in the quiet tension of Gunther's body. The moment was here and he was not ready for it.

Jerd poked again at the fire, stirring up a fountain of sparks. "To hate to see men die is not being chicken-hearted," he said slowly. "Lots of folks feel like I do."

Gunther gave a ugly laugh. "For my money," he said deliberately, "you're still chicken-hearted."

Jerd could feel his muscles bunching. He knew that he couldn't stall this off much longer. The stick with which he had been poking into the fire was still in his hand. He jabbed once more at the fire and the stick caught, resting over a log. Almost viciously, Jerd rammed the top end toward the ground. The fire erupted, kicking burning brands into the air, and pitching one, almost as though by design, straight at Gunther.

A sharp, angry cry broke from Gunther's throat. He rolled quickly away, clawing out his gun as he saw Jerd come to his feet and lunge straight through the fire toward him. The blast of the gun was deafening in Jerd's ears. Flecks of powder stung his cheeks and neck but the bullet missed.

Gunther was still on his back, propping himself up with his elbows when Jerd kicked the gun from his hand. The man rolled away. He came to his knees. He stood up. His fists were clenched, his head lowered. For a breathless moment he stared at Jerd Cameron and all the hot, unbridled temper of the man was there in his face for anyone to see. It was there and it sounded in a bellow which came from his throat as he ripped forward.

Jerd blocked off one swinging fist. He stepped away from another, stabbing in at Gunther's face as he circled. A heavy blow slammed past his guard and caught him on the side of the face, scraping on toward his ear. It half dazed him. It sent him staggering sideways to trip and almost go down.

Gunther was after him without a break, swinging viciously with one heavy fist and then the other, still driving him backwards. You couldn't make any cover from blows such as Gunther was swinging. His fists were like rocks driven by steel muscles and with all the weight of his body behind each blow.

Jerd Cameron lowered his head and plowed in at the man, bringing his fists up into Gunther's stomach with all the power he had. A rocking blow against the side of the head twisted him away and Gunther now was driving at him harder than before. Jerd again tried to cover up. He slipped on a rock and went to



his knees. He fell away from a kick aimed at his head. He rolled over and scrambled to his feet and Gunther was there when he stood up.

Jerd had the conviction that he couldn't hurt the man. His fist smashed against Gunther's jaw and it was like hitting a granite boulder. He could feel the pain of the blow in his knuckles and up along his arm. Gunther only shook his head as though to clear it and plowed in again.

They circled the fire once more, Jerd still giving ground. In the fringe of light beyond it he saw Clem Cody and Don Throop, Roger Keenan, Vance Malone and Foxy Williams, watching this with a silent, startled attention. They wouldn't cut in either one way or the other. This was his fight, his and Gunther's, and it was going all to Gunther. Jerd went down on one knee again but was up almost at once. He stood his ground and traded punches with Gunther but there seemed to be no power left in his arms.

Gunther appeared to sense this. He lunged straight in at Jerd, snapping one blow at his head and then another. Jerd side-stepped. He staggered, caught himself, swung out of the way again as Gunther charged in once more, and as Gunther missed him he straightened and put all the power he could summon into a swinging blow to Gunther's jaw. It caught the heavier man off balance. It lifted him to his toes. He reeled sideways. He tripped and sprawled toward the ground and there was the fire, right where he was falling. He couldn't catch himself now. A high, shrill scream tore from his throat. He got his arms in to protect his face and sparks and scattering brands spat out from where he fell.

He was up almost at once, lunging blindly away from the fire, tripping again as he staggered clear of it. Once more, then, he sprawled to the ground, his head coming to rest this time against an anchored rock. He hit it solidly. He didn't get up. He lay where he had fallen, as motionless as a dead man.

Jerd Cameron mopped his hand across his face, smearing the blood he didn't know was there. He stared soberly at the figure of Henry Gunther. His knees were wobbly. It was all he could do to keep his eyes in focus. Why it was Gunther instead of him who was lying motionless on the ground he didn't know. He had lost his gun from its holster. He started looking for it, found it, picked it up and slid it back in its leather sheath.

Foxy Williams who had moved forward and bent over Henry Gunther, straightened up. "He's not dead," Williams stated. "He's just knocked out. Maybe you'd better beat it, Jerd, before he wakes up."

Jerd Cameron nodded. There was no other course open to him now. He wondered, dully, why he hadn't used his gun on Gunther when

Gunther's hurried shot had missed him, but there was no point in looking back.

"Gunther owes me money," he heard himself saying. "Give me his keys."

Foxy Williams shook his head. "Maybe you'd better take them yourself."

Jerd rounded the fire. He stooped over Gunther's motionless figure, found his key chain and jerked it free. He straightened up and faced Gunther's men.

"Someone come with me," he suggested. "I mean to take only what I have coming."

They all went with him. They stood near the chuck wagon and watched while he dug Gunther's strong box from the boot. From the money in the strongbox he counted out four hundred and fifty dollars. "My wages were to be five hundred for the drive," he said bluntly. "We are a day short. Maybe two days short. I'm taking four hundred and fifty."

He counted the money again, locked the box and tossed the keys to Foxy Williams.

"Stay with Gunther if you want to," he said bluntly. "I've had my fill of him."

None of the men made any comment. Jerd headed for the remuda. He caught and saddled his favorite horse. He rode west. He didn't once look back.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dark Valley

THE night was warm. A high, round moon sent its soft, mellowing light down against the night shadows. Jerd Cameron took the same course he and Gunther had followed two nights before. After a time he was able to think back clearly over what had happened.

He had his deep regrets, now that he hadn't pulled his gun when he had lunged across the fire at Gunther. The way things had worked out, nothing was settled between them unless he kept on riding and never turned back. Even that might be no solution, for Gunther was not a man to forget an injury. He would never be wholly safe from Gunther as long as the man lived.

Jerd pulled up and took his time rolling a smoke. It was no easy task. His knuckles were skinned. His fingers were stiff, awkward. He propped the quirky between his puffed and swollen lips and, after lighting it, rode on. He had no plans. This break with Gunther had been as sudden as it was complete. He had thought, some, of starting out on his own after this drive but he had done no really serious thinking along such a line. The money he had in his pocket wasn't enough for a start. The rest of his money was in a bank back in Texas.

Almost before he realized it he was at the



rim overlooking the Unitah basin and once more he pulled up. He rolled another smoke and as he lit it he heard a sound off to the right. His head jerked in that direction. This was a rocky rim, some of the boulders standing as high as a man. In the thin shadow of one he could detect a movement and his eyes caught the glint of moonlight on a rifle barrel. Jerd's hand slid back to his gun. He sat rigid, unmoving, knowing that he was covered.

"That's right," said a man's voice. "Stay where you are. Don't try to pull your gun."

Jerd moistened his swollen lips. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Maybe I just want to talk," said the man in the shadows.

Jerd shrugged his shoulders. "Go ahead."

"You're going to run into plenty of trouble when you hit the basin," the man said bluntly. "Your only chance is to buy a place. I know where you can buy one."

"Where?"

"It won't be easy."

"Where is it?"

"I'm talking about Ed Wright's place. With Ed gone there's only his brother, his daughter and two hired men left. His brother owned half the ranch. He'd sell out for a decent price. He'd even persuade Ed's daughter to sell. You'd have to get rid of the two hired men."

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you?" said Jerd dryly.

"I'm showing you what could be done," said the man in the shadows. "Of course if you want to fight the whole basin, come right ahead."

"What do you get out of it?" Jerd asked. "Who are you?"

"Forget about me," said the man. "I'm offering you no help. I'm just telling you something."

Jerd had no idea what the man in the shadows looked like. His figure was an indistinct blur. His voice wasn't one which could easily be identified. It had sounded thick, half muffled, as though the man had been talking through a wadded handkerchief.

"Gunther has been figuring something else," Jerd said slowly. "Maybe I'd better ride back and tell him about Wright's place."

"Do as you please," the man answered, "it makes no difference to me."

Jerd wheeled his horse from the rim. He headed back the way he had come. Beyond the screen of a growth of scrub pine he pulled up. The faint, fading sound of hoofbeats reached his ears. Jerd had planned to circle around to the rim in the hope of another meeting with the man in the shadows but the other had moved too fast for him. He had wasted no time at all in getting away.

Half a mile north and in a wooded area, Jerd Cameron made his night camp. Stretched

out flat on the ground he stared up through the trees toward the purple sky. In a way, the proposition made by the man in the shadows was not surprising. In any place the size of the Unitah basin there were bound to be a few men who had forgotten the meaning of honor, whose outward appearance of integrity might cover a rotten soul.

Jerd's body was stiff and sore from the battering he had taken. He was a long time in getting to sleep.

HE WAS up before dawn and with the first light of morning he stood in the shelter of the boulder where the man in the shadows had been standing the night before. He found nothing to indicate who the other was. Working out in a wide, half-circle from this point, Jerd came finally to the place where a horse had been tied. He spent only a short time studying the hoof marks but when he turned to leave he was sure he could identify them when he saw them again. The horse had been shod. Three shoes were full but on the right front hoof the shoe tips were shortened.

Jerd followed their trail down into the basin, several times checking the hoof marks. The rider had been swinging south, close to the curving rim. Jerd knew that he might have been able to follow the trail quite a distance but he didn't want to be seen following it and after a time he turned west in the general direction of the town. He crossed one small stream and then another and just beyond this second stream and a little to the north he saw the buildings of a ranch house. He couldn't be positive but he was almost sure that this was the Wright ranch.

He reined up, frowning. After a brief hesitation he angled straight for the buildings.

There were several of them, a tall barn, three small cabins and the ranch house, low and built in the shape of an L. These were grouped with the corral and two sheds in almost a circle. Jerd rode into this yard close to the ranch house. An old, stoop-shouldered man near the barn turned and stared at him out of a leathery, wrinkled face. As Jerd pulled up he called, "George. Hey, George! Someone here to see you."

The man who appeared in the barn doorway was the man who had been with Ed Wright's daughter in Unitah, and whose gun she had grabbed. He was thin, slender. He had narrow pinched features and dark eyes which stared sharply at Jerd Cameron.

"I've got him covered, uncle," called a voice from the house.

Jerd looked that way. Martha Wright was standing in the open doorway of the ranch house, a rifle at her shoulder. She was wearing boots, a pair of levis and a faded blue shirt. Her dark, braided hair was coiled about



her head. Her lips, pressed tightly together, made a thin, straight line across her face. There was a steady, unwavering look in her eyes.

George Wright moved forward. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly. "Why have you come here?"

This was no easy question to answer. Just why he had come this way hadn't been very clear in Jerd's mind even when he had headed for these buildings. He had thought vaguely of warning the Wrights of what to expect when Gunther reached the basin, but Gunther, without the suggestion of the man in the shadows, might not hit this ranch.

"Well?" George Wright snapped.

"Tell your niece she can put her rifle up," Jerd answered slowly. "I didn't come here to shoot anyone. As a matter of fact, I'm not riding for Gunther any more."

Wright's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "So you're not riding for Gunther. What of it?"

"Nothing."

"You still haven't said what you want."

"Suppose I put it this way," Jerd suggested. "My job with Gunther was driving cattle. It didn't include murder or what might develop into a range war. Part of the reason I stopped here was to say I was sorry about what happened in Unitah the other night."

"Get out," said Martha Wright. "Turn that horse of yours an' ride."

George Wright had a puzzled frown on his face. He was staring at Jerd as though in an effort to read some deeper meaning in what Jerd had said.

"Just a minute, Martha," he called. "I've an idea. Sam, watch this fellow for a minute."

The old man who had seen Jerd ride up, now pulled the gun he was wearing. He nodded. George Wright walked on to the house. He drew Martha inside and closed the door.

THE sun was warm. There was almost no breeze. Jerd sat quietly on his horse aware of the heat and of an insistent hunger. The old man watched him steadily. This old man, Jerd realized, was probably one of the two hired hands marked for death by the man in the shadows.

After a few minutes George Wright opened the door of the ranch house. "Come on in for a minute," he invited, "we want to talk to you. Sam will take care of your horse."

Jerd swung to the ground and as he waited for the old man to come up a sudden, sharp excitement gripped him. Here, crossing this yard and recrossing it was the fresh trail of the horse which had been ridden by the man in the shadows. There were other hoofprints in the yard, many of them, but he knew he wasn't mistaken in the particular ones he had

just noticed. He had studied them too closely to make any mistake about them.

The old man took the reins of his horse. George Wright was waiting on the porch. Jerd started that way. He hoped the look on his face didn't betray the abrupt interest he was feeling. Was it possible, he wondered, that someone from this ranch had been the man in the shadows?

"Come on inside," Wright suggested.

Jerd climbed the porch. He stepped through the open door into the front room. It was a wide front room, comfortably furnished. Martha stood near one of the windows. She was frowning. Jerd pulled off his hat and smoothed back his hair. He was conscious of its shaggy, unkept appearance. He was conscious, too, of the battered look on his face, his puffed lips and the swelling high on his right cheek, reminders of his fight with Gunther.

George Wright entered the room and closed the door. "What is your name?" he asked bluntly.

Jerd gave his name. He had a strangely, uneasy feeling.

"You say you are no longer working for Gunther," Wright continued. "How can we be sure of that?"

"You can't," Jerd answered, "unless you take my word for it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"You say we can expect trouble with Gunther," Wright went on. "What makes you think so?"

"Anyone who opposes him can expect trouble," Jerd said slowly. "This ranch is pretty convenient to where he'll hit the basin."

George Wright bit at his lips. His eyes were hard to read. Jerd kept wondering about those hoofprints he had noticed in the yard.

"Martha doesn't approve of this," Wright was saying, "and maybe I'll be sorry for it, but I'm thinking of offering you a job. Would you be interested?"

Jerd didn't know what to answer. There was something wrong to an offer like this. With the knowledge of Gunther's threat, no one in the basin should be offering a job to one of Gunther's men.

"It's like this," said George Wright. "If we've got to fight Gunther it might not hurt us to have someone on our side who knows Gunther and who will know what to expect. How about it? Do you want a job?"

This hadn't been in Jerd's mind at all. He didn't want a job. He stared at the girl. Martha's disapproval was evident in her face but she was letting George Wright have his way, deferring to Wright's judgment.

"Regular wages," said George Wright. "That's all we'll pay. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Jerd abruptly.



He was surprised at his answer. He hadn't meant to say he would take the job.

Martha turned and left the room, almost slamming the door as she went out. George Wright smiled but his smile was quickly gone and he was scowling again as he looked back at Jerd.

"We have two other men," he stated. "Sam Nestlehouse is the old fellow you met outside, but don't let his age fool you. He's mighty good with a gun. So is Dutch McAdams, his partner. If they're here to back us up when Gunther strikes, Gunther won't find things too easy."

Was there a thinly veiled suggestion in those words? Jerd moistened his lips. He looked at George Wright and then looked quickly away. It was impossible to think that George Wright could have been the man in the shadows, yet there was enough that pointed that way—the hoofprints in the yard, this job which should never have been offered him, the warning about the other two hired men.

"Come on," said George Wright. "I'll show you around."

Jerd Cameron nodded. He realized, abruptly, that this job he had taken committed him to the struggle between Gunther and the men of the Utah basin. It threw him on the other side, against the men with whom he had been riding. It made another meeting between him and Gunther almost inevitable. A scowl settled on his face. There was even more to it than that. He was involved, here, in a situation which had some dark and hidden meaning he couldn't fathom, and which carried its own subtle danger.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Draw—or Die

**G**EORGE WRIGHT gave him no work to do. Wright told him there would be plenty to do later on and not to worry. Wright told him that after Dutch McAdams got back from town there would be a division of chores between him and Sam Nestlehouse and McAdams, the other hired man.

Jerd was glad of the chance to spend an afternoon at the ranch house. He took things easy. He spotted the horse which the man in the shadows had ridden. It was a bay mare, now in the corral. This meant, definitely, that the man in the shadows had been from this ranch.

Martha Wright kept to the house. Jerd saw nothing of her until supper time and then saw her only briefly. McAdams got back just before supper. He was almost as old as Sam Nestlehouse, bald, grouchy. He didn't have much to say when he met Jerd Cameron. His

face gave no indication of his feelings. Jerd had a notion that these two old men, Sam Nestlehouse and Dutch McAdams, could be plenty tough if necessary. Taking over the Wright ranch wouldn't be a walk-away for Gunther, if these two had to be reckoned with, and they weren't the type of men who were often caught napping.

Martha Wright, now that her father was dead, was alone in the ranch house. George Wright used one of the cabins. Sam Nestlehouse and Dutch McAdams shared another. The third cabin, vacant, was turned over to Jerd Cameron. This was only a temporary arrangement, Jerd knew, but this entire deal was temporary. Martha Wright didn't want him here. Neither Nestlehouse or McAdams had welcomed him. Even George Wright wasn't sure of him. The deal was very temporary.

George Wright left for town right after supper and after a private word with Nestlehouse and McAdams, a warning to them, Jerd guessed, to keep an eye on him. Jerd had an after-supper smoke on the ranch house porch. Gunther's cattle, by this time, he figured, must be close to the rim. Tonight or tomorrow they would be in the basin. Gunther would move them in, he figured, and would worry about them later. Without any question, Gunther's first move would be to get into the valley.

Jerd had decided, by this time, that George Wright had been the man in the shadows. There was no other way to figure it. The man in the shadows had almost asked that the two hired men here be killed. Neither Nestlehouse or McAdams would have suggested that. The man in the shadows had said that George Wright could be induced to sell out and maybe Wright was ready to sell. Maybe, as he had promised, he could even induce Martha to sell her share of this range.

Jerd had another cigarette and, as he finished it, Martha Wright came out on the porch. She looked at him thoughtfully. She was dressed as she had been dressed this morning but was now wearing an old grey sweater over the faded blue shirt.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Cameron," she said bluntly. "I want the truth, although maybe that's too much to expect."

Jerd shrugged his shoulders. He waited for Martha to continue.

"Why did you quit working for Mr. Gunther?" Martha asked.

"It was a break which had to come," Jerd said slowly. "Gunther forced it, or maybe I did through the way I acted."

"You had a fight?"

"Yes."

"And now you want to get even?"

"You can put it that way if you wish."



"Wouldn't it be true?"

"No."

Martha was frowning. She was standing on the porch near the door, leaning against the wall of the house, her hands in the pockets of the sweater. She seemed tired.

Mr. Cameron," she said abruptly, "just exactly what is Mr. Gunther going to do when he reaches the basin, or do you know—or will you tell me?"

"I don't know," Jerd answered. "I can only guess."

"And it's your guess that he is going to bother us?"

"That he might."

Martha straightened. She leaned forward. "If you are right," she said deliberately, "it would help him a good deal, wouldn't it, to have one of his men already here—on the inside."

Jerd could feel the flush of color coming to his face. This was a direct accusation growing out of Martha's bitterness toward the man who had killed her father. There was nothing he could say, no effective answer.

"I may be wrong about you," Martha added. "I hope I am, but until I'm sure of where you stand, you're going to be watched every minute. We're taking no chances with you. That's all I wanted to say. You can go now."

Jerd Cameron didn't move from where he was standing. There was a tight smile on his lips. He shook his head, not at what Martha had been saying but in his own consideration of what she faced. There was someone on this ranch who definitely needed watching. Gunther already had a man on the inside but not the man whom Martha suspected. He could tell her of the man in the shadows and what the man had proposed but he knew she wouldn't believe him, and that he couldn't prove his story.

"Well?" Martha asked.

"I am not working for Gunther," Jerd said slowly. "I'm working for you. Some day I hope you'll believe me."

**T**HIS was another pleasant night, with a clear sky and a high, bright moon.

After Martha had gone back into the ranch house Jerd moved over to his cabin and sat on the steps in front of it. His talk with the girl had told him nothing that he didn't know. It hadn't pointed out what course he should follow. He wondered why he shouldn't get up and saddle his horse and ride on. He had nothing to gain through staying here. Nothing at all.

Sam Nestlehouse and Dutch McAdams were in front of the next cabin. Jerd could hear the occasional murmur of their voices. Smoking brought him no comfort. He was tired but a vague apprehension held him from

turning in. He wondered where George Wright had gone and when he would be back, and just what game it was that Wright was playing.

The moon climbed steadily higher into the sky. The lights in the ranch house went out but the two old men in front of the cabin next to Jerd's showed no signs of retiring. That they were still up only because he hadn't retired, was pretty clear. Usually men on a ranch got to bed much earlier than this.

It was close to midnight when George Wright returned. He rode up to the corral and dismounted. One of the old men went out to talk to him and after a moment called, "Hey, Dutch. Come here."

There was a brief conference near the corral and afterwards Dutch McAdams and Sam Nestlehouse saddled up and rode off in the direction of Unith.

Jerd Cameron's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. This didn't fit into the ordinary routine of a ranch job. It carried a subtle warning. He reached down and loosened the gun in his holster as George Wright left the corral and angled toward him.

"You still up, Cameron?" Wright called as he drew near.

Jerd nodded his head. "Still up," he answered. "What's happened?"

"Gunther's driving into the basin," Wright said slowly. "A crowd is riding to stop him. That's where Dutch and Sam Nestlehouse have gone. I've got something for you."

As he spoke, Wright lifted his gun and leveled it at Jerd Cameron, his body showing a sudden tension.

Jerd sat motionless. His right hand was only inches from his holster but he would have no chance at all to pull his gun and he knew it. He could read what this man intended to do in the tight, ugly expression on his face. Wright was waiting only until Dutch McAdams and Sam Nestlehouse would be out of the sound range of his bullet. He had made him move quickly, so quickly that Jerd hadn't been ready for him.

"I guess you've had a talk with Gunther," Jerd heard himself saying.

Wright nodded his head. "You had me fooled, Cameron," he admitted. "I thought Gunther had sent you here. I almost made a pretty serious mistake."

Jerd Cameron sucked in a long, slow breath. Here was an admission of all he had suspected. He tried to see some way out of this but he was afraid there was no way out. The gun Wright was holding was steady in the man's hand. Back of him, lights came on in the ranch house. Martha must have heard Wright return and must be expecting a report.

"Gunther will be here soon," Wright men-



tioned. "He told me to save you for him. Maybe I should."

"Where did you send the two old men?" Jerd asked.

George Wright moistened his lips. "They'll not be back."

The cold and callous note in Wright's voice sent a shiver running over Jerd's body. Here was a man who would make a fit partner to Henry Gunther, a man to whom life wasn't important.

"What do you get out of this?" he asked. "Just how smart have you been, Wright? Do you think Gunther ever plays fair?"

Wright shrugged his shoulders. "Gunther will need me, Cameron. He'll need me to make the sale of our range acceptable to the others in the basin."

There was probably a touch of truth in that. George Wright was one of the Unitah basin men. His word might be accepted by the others. And where did this leave Martha? What chance did she have against this man and against Henry Gunther? The answer was clear. She had no chance at all.

"Steady, Cameron," Wright said sharply. "Keep that hand away from your gun."

The door to the ranch house opened. Martha stepped out on the porch. She called, "George! George!"

The man facing Jerd Cameron caught his breath. "I'll be there in just a minute," he answered. "I'll—"

Martha's appearance was only a slight distraction but Jerd knew that he could expect no more of a break than this. He rolled sideways from the step on which he had been sitting, at the same time clawing for his gun. He heard the blast of George Wright's shot and felt the jar of the bullet ripping into his shoulder. His gun came up and he fired. He saw Wright take a step toward him and then another. Wright's gun arm lowered. His gun fell from his hand. His knees buckled and he fell heavily to the ground. He lay there face down, without moving.

Jerd got slowly to his feet and as he stood up the pain hit him, stabbing him brutally in his shoulder and radiating through his body. He holstered his gun and leaned against the wall of the cabin, fighting off a wave of dizziness. The fading sound of Martha's scream echoed in his ears. The girl had come running forward. She was kneeling at her uncle's side, had rolled him over.

The pain in Jerd's shoulder was almost more than he could stand. He felt under his coat. His shirt was soaked with blood. The wound was high. He couldn't lift his left arm.

Martha stood up and faced him, her face pale in the moonlight and showing the strain she was feeling. "So this was why you came here," she cried, and her voice was almost

hysterical. "Another murder to your credit. If I had a gun—"

She stooped over and pawed at Wright's holster but his holster was empty.

Jerd Cameron bit his lips. He was still fighting off the dizziness which crowded against him. "Gunther is on his way here," he heard himself saying. "He means to take over your ranch. Wright was in it with him. They planned—"

"A lie!" Martha shouted. "Another lie!"

Jerd shook his head. "At least you can leave here and ride for Unitah," he said earnestly. "Tell them anything in Unitah, but get away from here before Gunther arrives."

Martha's hands were clenched. "I'll get a gun," she answered. "That's what I'll get. A gun." She turned and started for the ranch house, running.

Jerd took one step after her and then another. He stumbled and fell and got awkwardly to his feet. He had to persuade Martha to leave this ranch before Gunther arrived. Right now, that was the most important thing in the world. Nothing else mattered. How he could get her to leave wasn't very clear in his mind but that one determination he clung to grimly.

After what seemed like a long time he reached the ranch house. He looked up. Martha stood in the doorway, a rifle to her shoulder. Jerd shook his head at her. He started to speak and suddenly he could stand up no longer. His knees folded and he pitched forward on his face and into a darkness which blotted out everything.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Grave—for the Quick

WHEN JERD CAMERON regained consciousness he was lying on a couch in the room where George Wright and Martha had interviewed him. A lamp was burning in a wall bracket above him. Another lamp stood on the table. His coat was off. The upper part of his shirt had been cut away and his shoulder was bandaged. The wound was burning agony.

Martha came into the room from the kitchen. She was still pale and a cold hatred showed in her eyes as she looked at him. "I wish I had killed you," she said deliberately and the edge of her temper was still in her voice. "Or I wish I could have left you lying in the yard, to die there. Don't think you have anything to look forward to. Here in the basin they hang men for what you did."

Gunther hadn't yet reached the ranch, Jerd was sure. He stared up at the girl. "Go for the sheriff, then," he suggested. "I can't get away. Go for him now."



"I'll wait until Sam and Dutch get back," Martha answered.

"They'll not be back."

"Another lie."

"They'll not be back," Jerd repeated.

Martha lifted her head, listening. "Someone's coming now," she declared.

Jerd could hear the drumming sound of hoofbeats pounding, closer and closer. He reached for his gun but it wasn't in its holster. Martha must have taken it, or perhaps he had lost it when he fell to the ground, outside.

"That'll be Gunther," he said slowly. "You can still get out the back way."

Martha looked at him curiously. She crossed to the door, picked up the rifle which was standing there; opened the door and stepped out on the porch. The men they had heard were pulling into the yard. Jerd sat up. He got to his feet. He blew out the lamp above the couch, crossed to the table and blew out the lamp there. As he turned away from the table he heard Gunther's voice outside.

"Wright!" Gunther was calling. "George Wright! Where are you?"

Jerd moved up to the door. There were five men with Gunther, his entire crew. They had fanned out as they came into the yard. Several were holding their rifles at a half point. Gunther was straight out from the door, leaning forward a little as he stared toward the porch where he could unquestionably see Martha.

"Where's George Wright?" Gunther asked again, his voice sharp with impatience.

"What do you want with him?" Martha demanded.

"Where is he?" Gunther roared.

"He's not here."

"Then we'll wait for him," Gunther answered.

He swung to the ground and started toward the house.

"That's far enough," said Martha Wright suddenly. "Take one more step this way and I'll fire."

Henry Gunther stopped. He pushed back his hat. Jerd couldn't see Martha, for she had moved to one side of the door but he knew that she had lifted her rifle and had centered it on Gunther. He couldn't see Gunther's face clearly but he could imagine the look of puzzlement and annoyance which had settled there.

"Put down that rifle," Gunther ordered. "I'm here to see your uncle."

"I'll not put down my rifle," Martha said sharply. "Climb back on your horse and ride."

Gunther shook his head. "Look here, girl. I've bought this place, or at least your uncle's half of it. Don't tell me to get out."

"That's not true," Martha cried. "I don't believe it."

"Then wait and ask your uncle. Now put down that rifle. We're here to stay."

"Keep back!" Martha's voice was steady. "I don't believe a word you've said. Get off of my land."

Gunther looked around at his men. "Come on, fellows," he said gruffly, "she won't shoot."

It was about time, Jerd decided, to take a hand in this himself. He stood in the doorway but still in the deep shadows of the room where he couldn't be seen.

"Gunther!" he called out. "You heard the lady. She said fork your horse and ride. Maybe you had better do it."

Henry Gunther had stiffened. He had swung to face the door. His hand dropped to his gun.

"Come out in the open, Cameron!" he challenged. "Come out in the open."

Jerd Cameron laughed. "No thanks. There are too many of you."

"We'll make it just you and me," Gunther offered. "Step out where I can see you."

Again Jerd laughed. It was a dry, mocking laugh. There was no humor in it. "Some other time, Gunther," he suggested. "Some time, maybe, when the light's better. If you want to live until then, fork your horse and ride. Now!"

A sharp urgency had come into Jerd's voice. Gunther stood where he was. It had never been his way to back off from anything. Jerd could appreciate the torture of this moment, the temptation it was to Gunther to pull his gun and blast away at the shadows beyond the open door. Yet even Henry Gunther wasn't that reckless. Gunther didn't know that Jerd wasn't armed. Gunther must have been sure, in his mind, that to pull his gun would invite a shot from Jerd Cameron.

"Now, Gunther!" Jerd snapped.

The tension went out of Henry Gunther's body. He straightened up. "This is my range," he declared. "I've bought it and paid for it. I will not be driven from it. We will wait for George Wright."

He turned, reached for the reins of his horse and angled toward the barn, leading it. His men followed him.

JERD made his way through the darkness of the room to the couch. His legs felt shaky. The wound in his shoulder was bleeding again. He could feel the warm blood running down his side from under the bandage. He lay down on the couch and pressed his hand firmly on the bandage above the wound.

Martha came to the door, then stepped inside. "They're waiting at the barn," she said dully. "They haven't gone away."

"They'll not go away," Jerd answered. "And they'll not wait long. Gunther doesn't believe in waiting."

"What will they do?" Martha asked.



"Gunther will probably give you a chance to sell out to him."

"I'll never sell. George didn't sell. Mr. Gunther lied."

Jerd Cameron made no answer. He lay perfectly quiet, his hand still maintaining its pressure on the bandage.

"Why would George have sold his half of the range?" Martha asked, almost under her breath. "He had no reason to sell. He would never have sold without talking to me."

"You had better see that the doors and windows are all locked," Jerd suggested. "And if Gunther comes back you'd better agree to talk to him. Maybe you can put it off until morning. Maybe you can stall him and insist on a conference in Unitah."

"I'll never talk to him about selling my and," Martha said sharply.

"You can't avoid it—if I know Gunther."

Martha Wright, who was still looking into the yard, reached suddenly for her rifle. "Someone's coming," she said under her breath.

Jerd turned his head but Martha's slender figure blocked his view.

"Hey, Jerd," called a voice from the yard. "It's Foxy. Can I come in and talk?"

"As far as the porch, Foxy," Jerd answered.

He sat up, got to his feet. He moved unsteadily to the door and stared past Martha into the yard. Foxy Williams was coming forward. He was a thin man, slightly stooped, close to forty. He was the one man in Gunther's crew whom Gunther had always been able to count on. He was cruel, ruthless, but with none of Gunther's strength or drive. He had earned the name Foxy. He was a man Jerd had learned to watch.

"That's far enough," Jerd said as the man reached the porch. "Do your talking fast."

Foxy shrugged his shoulders. "What's the matter, Cameron? Afraid to show yourself?"

"Maybe," Jerd answered. "What do you want?"

"You're on the wrong side, Cameron," Foxy Williams said bluntly. "Gunther bought George Wright's land. They closed the deal and signed papers. Wright got his money in cash. These buildings were held in common by George and his brother. We have as much right to be here as the woman who controls the other half of the range."

"All right," Jerd agreed. "What's bothering you? You're here."

"Gunther wants to talk to the woman. Maybe she'd like to sell her half."

"I'll never sell," Martha cried. "Never."

"Well, you've got your answer, Foxy," Jerd declared. "Anything more?"

"Yes. What are you doing here?"

"I'm working here."

"Gunther says you've got until morning to pull out."

"Thanks."

"He still wants to talk to the woman."

"Tomorrow, maybe."

"Gunther says tonight."

Jerd's legs were beginning to feel wobbly again. He moved to the wall near the door and leaned there for support. He shook his head in the darkness. He said, "No, Foxy. Anyone who comes near this house tonight is liable to run into a bullet. Get back to Gunther and tell him that."

Foxy Williams shrugged his shoulders once more. He turned and headed back toward the barn.

JERD sat down on the floor near the door, then lay down on his back. He heard Martha cross the room and go through the side door. After a time she returned. She came close to where he was lying and stood for a moment looking down at him.

"I brought—George's body to the house," she said slowly. "I just looked in his pockets. This money was there."

Something dropped to the floor at Jerd's side. Jerd found it, picked it up. It was a thin roll of bills.



...ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ★



"I still can't believe it," Martha said slowly, and her voice was tired and without spirit. "I still can't believe it, but George had no money when he left here. Dutch wanted a loan of five dollars. George couldn't advance it."

Jerd said nothing. He stared up at the vague, indistinct figure of the girl.

"He asked me, just the other day," Martha continued, "if I would consider selling out and going back East. I told him I wouldn't. I didn't think he was serious about wanting to sell."

Jerd fingered the bandage on his shoulder. His wound was still bleeding but not too heavily. The sharp pains he had felt had turned into a steady, throbbing ache. He was tired. His face felt flushed. He wondered if he could already be running a fever. He tried to put his mind on what Martha was saying, but it wasn't easy. Staring up at her again he had a faint appreciation of what a shock this was to her. She had relied on her uncle after her father's sudden and tragic death. The realization of what her uncle had done had left her stunned, confused, bewildered.

"This man Gunther," Jerd said slowly, "isn't only a hard man. He's clever, smart. He said he was moving into the basin and he meant it. He would have fought his way in if necessary. Instead he met your uncle and bought his range, bought a right to be here. You can refuse to sell what you own but if what Foxy Williams said was true, Gunther is here to stay."

Martha shook her head. "He's not here to stay."

"I'm afraid he is."

"My father and my uncle had a partnership agreement. This agreement provided that neither could sell his land without the approval of the other. An attorney in Utah told both of us that the partnership agreement was still binding on my uncle and me—even though father is dead."

Jerd sat up. He didn't know much about law but he knew that a partnership agreement could have been drawn up which would be binding on a man's heirs. If the agreement had read that way, Gunther needed Martha's signature to make his deal with George Wright legal. This meant that Gunther's position wasn't solid. It meant that Martha could still block him if she refused to sign.

Martha had crossed to the door and was staring toward the barn. "I don't see them," she said under her breath. "I didn't hear them ride away."

"Are the doors and windows locked?" Jerd asked.

"Yes."

"What about a gun, Martha?"

The girl left the room. She was back a moment later. She handed Jerd his gun.

"He wouldn't dare to attack us," she said uncertainly.

"You don't know Gunther," Jerd answered.

"We can hold them off."

Jerd shook his head, "Not Gunther."

There was a sudden, heavy hammering at the back of the house. A moment later Gunther's voice reached them. "All right then," he was shouting. "Break the door in."

Jerd got quickly to his feet. "Light the lamps, Martha," he said bluntly. "Here they come."

Martha had turned and picked up the rifle. She was lifting it to her shoulder. Jerd reached out and took it away from her. "As long as you sign nothing, you're safe," he said grimly. "Remember that. No matter what happens, don't sign Gunther's paper. Now light the lamps."

He crossed to the side wall and leaned there. He heard the back door splintering and then Gunther's voice once more.

"What'll it be, Cameron? Guns or talk?"

Martha struck a match. She lit the lamp on the table and looked swiftly at Jerd. Her lips made a tight, stubborn line across her face. She was still a little pale but she didn't seem frightened. Jerd nodded to her. He managed a grin. "Well, Cameron?" Gunther called again. "What'll it be?"

"Talk, to begin with, Gunther," Jerd answered clearly. "Come on in."

**H**ENRY GUNTHER was the first man through the door. Others crowded in after him, close behind him, but Gunther was first. He had a gun in his hand and he half lifted it when he saw Jerd Cameron, then lowered it again. There was a flushed, angry look on his face. He was breathing heavily. He glanced at Martha, then looked back at Jerd. His business was with the girl, but his interest and his driving anger were aimed at Jerd Cameron.

The men who followed Gunther into the room spread out on either side of him. All were there but Foxy Williams. Clem Cody and Dan Throop stood on Gunther's left. Rog Keenan and Vance Malone were to his right. Malone and Keenan had drawn their guns but Throop hadn't and neither had Clem Cody. Throop and Cody didn't look any too happy about this. All four of these men would probably back Henry Gunther, but two of them, at least, would do so without much enthusiasm. Footsteps sounded across the porch and Foxy Williams appeared in the door. There was a twisted, ugly smile on his face. He had been covering the front of the house while Gunther and the others broke in through the back door. His gun was still in his hand.

Gunther moistened his lips. His eyes had



narrowed thoughtfully. He nodded his head. "Wright's dead," he said suddenly. "He got you in the shoulder. Too bad he couldn't shoot straighter."

A brief, humorless smile touched Jerd's lips. He was surprised that he was not more excited. It occurred to him that he owed his life to Martha Wright. Gunther wanted something from Martha. This was all that held him back. If it hadn't been for that, Gunther would have never lowered his gun.

"Let's get this over," he heard himself saying. "Speak your piece, Gunther."

Henry Gunther glanced at Martha. He reached into his pocket. "Here's the paper your uncle signed," he said to her. "Want to look at it?"

He held the paper out toward the girl. He managed a smile. Martha shook her head, but that didn't seem to bother Henry Gunther.

"I bought half a range," he said slowly. "I want the other half. I mean to have it. I'll pay for it or take it. How I get it is up to you."

Martha was still shaking her head. "What you bought from my uncle," she answered, "is no sale without my signature. I'll sign nothing."

"You'll sign this paper," Gunther said bluntly. "You'll sign it or you'll get nothing. Do you think I'll let a woman stand in my way?"

Martha's lips tightened. "I'll not sign."

Again that smile which wasn't a smile at all touched Gunther's lips. "I have this paper, signed by your uncle, to show in Unitah," he stated. "I can add your name. Foxy Williams is pretty good at copying a signature. Somewhere around here we'll find a sample for him. He might not make a perfect copy but after he has practiced a while it'll be good enough to get by."

"I'll deny I ever signed the paper," Martha flared.

Gunther shook his head. "Unfortunately you may not be around to deny anything. We'll explain that you and your uncle left the basin quite suddenly. Some folks may not believe that but they'll not be able to prove differently. And a letter or so in your handwriting which Foxy can copy, will stop most of the talk."

Foxy Williams seemed amused. He chuckled, nodding his head.

Martha was staring at Gunther wide-eyed. She moistened her lips. "You—you wouldn't dare."

"I said I wouldn't let a woman stand in my way. I won't."

Jerd glanced at the men who had come into this room with Gunther. They didn't like this. He could tell that by the expressions on their faces. He could be sure of it because he knew

them. Even Keenan and Vance Malone were looking uneasy. Foxy Williams was perhaps the only one of Gunther's men who would go along, all the way, on a deal like this.

"Here's the paper," Gunther said once more. "Look it over. Sign it."

Martha took the paper, she hardly looked at it. Staring straight at Gunther she deliberately tore it in half and threw it on the floor. Gunther's motion to stop her was too late.

A sharp, tense silence followed. Gunther stared at the torn paper. He stared at the girl. His face was dark with rage. He took a step toward her and Martha backed away. Jerd's hand slid toward his gun.

"Get out of here, all of you," Gunther said abruptly. "Take Cameron with you. Hold him for me."

Jerd shook his head. His hand was now touching his gun. "No, we'll not get out," he said quietly. "This is a good place to settle things. We've all earned a vote, Gunther. Each one of us."

Foxy Williams was covering him from the doorway. "Come on, Cameron," he ordered, "you get your vote later on."

Jerd still shook his head. His eyes circled the room. Keenan and Vance Malone were looking uncertainly at Gunther. Clem Cody's gun was out and was half lifted. Cody was watching Foxy Williams. Dan Throop had backed to the wall. He was breathing heavily, glancing from side to side. How much help he could count on from these men, Jerd didn't know. Perhaps none. His eyes came back to Gunther.

"You've brought your cattle to the basin, Gunther," Jerd heard himself saying. "Maybe you've a right to a basin ranch. We won't argue that. We just draw the line at murder. That's all. Martha Wright doesn't want to sell. She doesn't have to. I reckon you've got to look for another range."

Henry Gunther wiped his hand across his mouth. He had turned squarely toward Jerd Cameron. His wide, sloping shoulders were a little hunched. His eyes had narrowed. The man's punishing anger had mottled his face.

"I should have killed you before," he said thickly. "You've lived too long."

Jerd Cameron was still leaning against the wall. He felt quite calm. His life, for the past several years, had been building toward this point, this final test of himself against Henry Gunther. Tonight, the decision would not be inconclusive. He straightened a little, pushing himself away from the wall. His hand rested lightly on his gun. Beyond Henry Gunther he could see Clem Cody and Dan Throop. The other men weren't in his line of vision. Martha was to Gunther's left. She stood very straight, her eyes wide, distended. She seemed to be holding her breath.



"Pull your gun, Cameron, if you've got the nerve to pull it," Gunther sneered. "You've always wanted to see if you could beat me."

Jerd's body was rigid. He could feel the throbbing of the wound in his left shoulder. He kept his eyes fastened on Gunther's face. Gunther, he knew, would make no motion toward his holster until he started his draw. Gunther had a supreme confidence in himself and in his ability. His hand was poised, claw-like, just above his gun. There was an ugly, twisted look on his face.

"Pull it, Cameron," he shouted suddenly. "Pull your gun or crawl."

Jerd Cameron's hand settled tightly on his gun. His arm lifted and as it came up, Gunther moved. He was fast, terribly fast. His gun exploded as it cleared its holster. Jerd felt the shock of the bullet. He didn't know he had fired at Gunther. He felt the wall at his back and he tried to brace himself against it but his legs wouldn't hold him up. He heard the roar of another shot and then another. He heard Foxy Williams's hoarse scream as Clem Cody's bullet caught the man in the chest. He didn't know Williams had fired at him. He was staring at Gunther, staring in fascination at the widening red stain on Gunther's shirt, staring at that stain and wondering how it had come there. He watched Gunther take a step toward him. He expected Gunther to fall but the man didn't. He didn't even seem to know he had been hit.

"You were good, all right," Gunther was saying. "You were good but not good enough. You never were good enough."

Jerd Cameron's vision had blurred. He tried to lift his gun once more but there was no strength in his arms. Gunther pitched to the floor almost at his feet but Jerd didn't know it. Jerd didn't know anything. He had lost consciousness.

**H**ENRY GUNTHER wouldn't die. He lay in one of the four beds in Mr. Dowling's hospital in Unitah for twenty-seven days. Each night the doctor was sure he wouldn't last until morning, but each morning he was still alive. There was no chance for him. An infection from his chest wound had driven its poison throughout his body but he clung grimly to his thin hold on life. He would talk to no one. He was dying as he had lived, hard, bitterly, and grimly alone.

On the twenty-eighth day he heard the doctor tell his wife that Jerd Cameron was much better and would soon be up and around. That night he turned his face to the wall and that night Henry Gunther died.

The sheriff had taken charge of Gunther's affairs. From Gunther's money, Roger

Keenan, Vance Malone and Dan Throop had been paid off and had drifted on, warned never to return. Foxy Williams, who had died the night of the fight at the Wright ranch house, had been buried. Clem Cody had stayed at the Wright ranch to look after Jerd Cameron, whose condition had been so serious that Dr. Dowling had refused to move him. Gunther's cattle had been rounded up and sold and this money, together with what remained of the money in Gunther's strong box, was sent, after his death, to his widow in Texas.

On the day when the sheriff mailed the money to Gunther's widow he marked the case as ended. Clem Cody and Jerd Cameron were still in the basin but the sheriff rather liked both of them and hoped they would stay. At least he expected no trouble from them. And he wasn't worried about Martha Wright. She had a good range, well stocked. She was an attractive girl. It wouldn't be long, the sheriff knew, before she would have a husband to help her run her ranch.

Jerd Cameron heard of Gunther's death from Clem Cody who had ridden into town with Sam Nestlehouse and Dutch McAdams. These two old men had missed the trap George Wright and Henry Gunther had set for them. They had never held much respect for George Wright and were not particularly sorry over his death.

Jerd was sitting up when Cody told him of Gunther's death. He felt no elation. As a matter of fact a scowl came to his face, when he heard that Gunther had died.

"He was a stronger man than any of us," Jerd said slowly. "He knew what he wanted, Clem. Some of us die without knowing why we ever lived."

"He was no good," Clem Cody growled. "By many standards you're right, but we would never have made the drive here without him. He had the strength which fitted these hills."

Clem Cody shook his head. He couldn't agree.

"What will we do when you can ride again?" Clem asked.

"Why not say here?" said Martha from the doorway.

Jerd turned his head and glanced at her. He had come to feel pretty close to Martha Wright during the past few weeks. Her suggestion appealed to him. He had the money to buy into a place in the Unitah basin. He liked this country.

He nodded his head. He said, "Yes, maybe we'll stay here."

A flush of color came into Martha's face. She turned and hurried away. Jerd Cameron grinned. He leaned back against his pillow and began building in his mind the kind of future he wanted.



# CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 47)

**H**OW'S your "rangeland rating" holding up these days? Test yourself on the twenty cow country quiz questions listed below and find out how you really rate. A score of eighteen or more correct answers puts you in the sage-rat class. Sixteen or seventeen is good. But if you can't answer more than fifteen—well, don't let anybody take you on a "wower hunt." Good luck!

1. True or false? In Western slang, "zorillas" are shoes.

2. True or false? A "yellow belly" is a breed of Mexican cattle having a yellowish belly.

3. According to the Western way of thinking, a "wagon herder" is: A cowpuncher whose duty it is to keep the wagons clean? A sheepherder who has a wagon? A cowpuncher, too old to ride, who has been given a job driving a wagon? A cowpuncher who sleeps in a wagon while on the trail?

4. "Plush couch" is the cowpuncher slang term for what well-known rangeland object?

5. The cattle country slang expression, "toothing," means: Looking into the mouth of a horse to attempt to tell how old he is? Growing a set of teeth. Pulling a tooth?

6. True or false? In Western language, "time" is an expression used for "wages."

7. A "tarrabee" is: A large insect found on the desert? A dry-land turtle? A type of cowboy dance? The slang name for a sheepherder? A machine used for spinning threads?

8. A "tail rider" is a person who: Rides far back in the saddle near the horse's tail? Rides behind the herd on the cattle drive? Whips his horse excessively?

9. If an old-time Western friend told you he had "just sunned his moccasins," you would think: That he had just been thrown from a horse? That he had just put his boots out in the sun to dry? That he had just been fired.

10. True or false? A "stripper" is an individual who skins dead cattle.

11. What is the meaning the Western slang expression, "Step across?"

12. If a Western friend of yours told you he was "planning to stay out with the dry cattle tonight," you would think he was: Planning to celebrate and get drunk? Planning to spend a night on the prairie? Planning to spend the night herding sheep?

13. True or false? The Western slang expression "soddy" means "dirty."

14. True or false? The term "snubbed stock" refers to cattle which has not been fed during the winter months.

15. True or false? A "shirttail outfit" is an outfit employing only a few hands.

16. In rangeland language, the term "sheep dipper" is used in reference to: Cattle rustlers? Cowpunchers? Camp cooks?

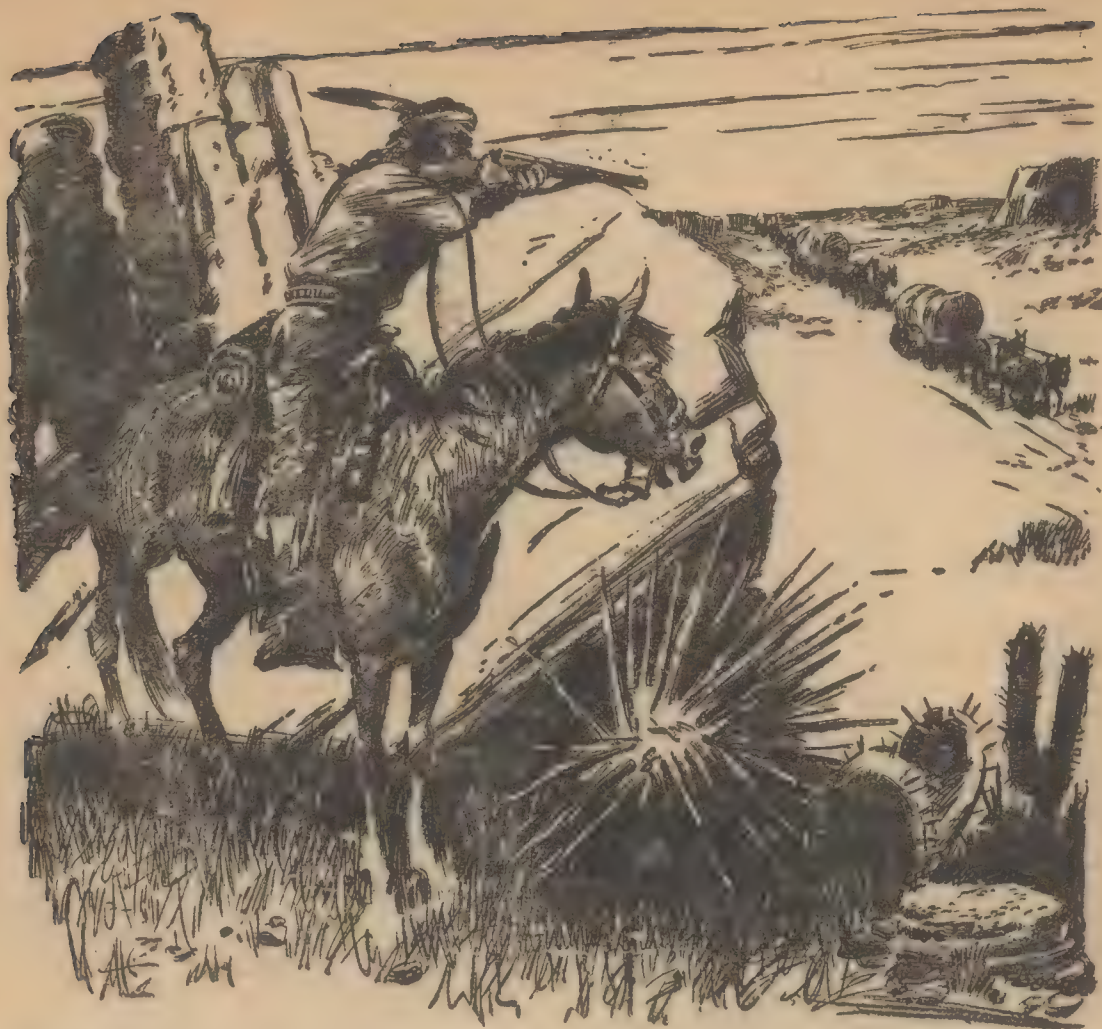
17. When a cowpuncher says he is "sage henning," he is: Looking for a wife? Spending the night on the desert without benefit of bedroll? Riding in the rain with his hat pulled well down over his ears?

18. What is the meaning of the old cowboy slang expression: "Saddled a dead horse to him?"

19. True or false? "Pony beeves" are young cattle of about the right age and weight for market.

20. In what part of the West would one be most likely to hear the term "pitching" used for "bucking?"





"Just as the sun was comin' up,  
the Apaches jumped us. . . ."

# BOOTHILL

**F**RANK BAIN and Nathan Raab were nearly an hour out of the town of Rowley when they saw the rose glow brightening the night sky in the direction of Echo Gap. The wind that had been in their faces for the last few miles brought the sound of scattered gunshots, and Raab said gravely, "Somethin's cut loose, Frank. Nesters are over that way."

"We're no help here," Bain said, and reined his horse off the road and urged it to the length of its stride up a long grade and toward a string of woodland, and Raab's black was

running even with his bay as he plunged into the timber's blackness. They dropped down on a low bench, picked up a defined trail that slashed its way across the Arrowhead range to the meadows where nesters' plows had bitten deep into virgin soil. They followed a barbed wire fence for nearly half a mile, splashed across a willow-lined creek and came out to the scene of violence.

Powder and wood smoke crawled into their noses and throats and stung their eyes. All the buildings that had been in the clearing



were burning close to the ground and there was a great blistered spot on the parched grass where a haystack had been. Nathan Raab was a deeply religious man and he said deep in his throat, "God have mercy upon them," but Frank Bain let loose his emotions with appropriate anathemas and hoped that the men who had committed this outrage would soon rot deep in hell. He got out of the saddle and walked up to where a gaunt, bearded man stood staring at a heap of embers. He heard a child crying somewhere, the hopeless sobbing of a woman.

"Did you get a look at any of them?" Bain asked the nester, and a face that seemed to have no more life in it turned toward him.

"What difference does it make, mister, what they looked like or who they was? Look at what's left after two years of tryin' t' get a head start."

They came out of the darkness beyond the reach of the flickering firelight moving like automaton; three other work-thinned farmers, their women and four children. Shock was still on them and they did not seem to see the Arrowhead riders. Nathan Raab had been friendly with one of the families and he went up to a man and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Ben, tell us all you know."

The nester drew the back of a hand across his eyes and said, "They come swoopin' in around eleven o'clock, Nathan. We was in bed an' they banged on the doors an' said t' pile out if we didn't want t' git roasted. Sam Vollmer come out with a shotgun an' they cut him down. They had their sweat rags up over

something. It was a child's rag doll. Bain joined him near a wagon and they both looked at a dog that was stretched out on the ground with a bullet between its eyes.

"Did a full job," Raab said, and the wind came in a sudden gust and whipped up hot ash and burning embers and they whirled quickly in time to see John Sturtevant, owner of the Arrowhead, come across the creek with nearly a dozen riders.

Sturtevant was tall and broad, the richest man in the county at the age of forty-seven. From a wide forehead his rugged face tapered down like a wedge, yet left him a firm and strong chin, and a man only had to look at his eyes to see the reasons for his success and the respect he commanded for miles around. He'd come to the valley fifteen years ago and had picked up the ailing Arrowhead and its seven thousand head of stock for the proverbial song, and now he had close to one hundred thousand head of cattle, and unlimited range. Sturtevant was the town of Rowley and had more than a little influence in the state capitol, and the sheriff, the postmaster, and the district attorney were always very careful not to do one thing to bring his displeasure.

The Arrowhead boss got off his big sorrel and swept the havoc with his eyes. He turned to a nester.

"If any of them belonged to the Arrowhead I'll drop the noose over their necks myself."

Nathan Raab said, "They wouldn't have took any chances," and Sturtevant turned slightly and looked at him. Frank Bain, as the eyes of the two men met, felt a strange

---

# CALL

---

*There were more ways than one to kill, Nathan Raab knew—till the man he hunted taught him that one was all you needed!*

---

their faces. Where can we go? Where is the law, Nathan?"

"Maybe we'll find some here, Ben."

The nester shook his head. "You know what the upshot of it'll be. The sheriff an' a few men'll take a ride an' that'll end it. They won't find anybody that's guilty. Guess you don't know what it means t' be a sodbuster, Nathan."

Frank Bain saw Raab's face undergo a change that was not pleasant to see. "Maybe not," Raab said and moved away to pick up

unease. Once before he had noticed something in the Arrowhead ranchyard, but had imagined then that it had been no more than two men finding in each other something that did not fit—it did not necessarily mean a clash.

Sturtevant was the first to turn away. He spoke to the bearded nester. "Logan, if your folks need shelter I'll see you get it. All the food you want."

"We'll take nothing from cattlemen," Logan said bitterly. "We'll shift for ourselves. I figure they left us our wagons so's we could



move on. Mister Sturtevant, I was sure I saw a claybank bronc t'night, wearin' your brand. I could have been mistaken."

Sturtevant said harshly, "I'll look into it—you can depend on that. I've offered you help, Logan. Take it an' don't be a fool."

"If you an' your men'll go, we'll bury our dead," Logan said.

FRANK BAIN was glad to get away from there. He and Nathan Raab trailed Sturtevant and his other punchers by nearly a quarter of a mile on the way to the Arrowhead. Raab suddenly said, "This is all wrong, Frank. The Lord never meant that man should live on meat alone. We have to have bread and porridge for our kids and corn and oats for livestock. There should be room for everybody in this land."

"Would seem that way," Bain said. No wonder, he thought, that even Sturtevant saw something beyond the general run of cow-puncher in Nathan Raab. The man had provoked much comment on the part of the other Arrowhead riders the day he had stowed his personal belongings in the bunkhouse. He was a heavy-boned, thin and black-haired. His flat-crowned, dusty black hat did not have too wide a brim and it gave him the look of a preacher. His eyes were kindly yet there were times, like tonight, when Bain had seen in them reasons for a strange disquietude.

Raab often left the bunkhouse in the middle of the night and he would saddle up and ride out into the hills, and many times he hadn't returned until breakfast was ready and on the table. John Sturtevant's foreman, Jack Bragg, had tried to draw Raab out on one of those mornings and the reply he'd gotten was: "I figure what I do on my own time is no concern of anybody, even John Sturtevant." Bragg never brought up the subject again, not even after seven Arrowhead horses had been stolen one night.

Bain thought now, *I'd like to ask this jigger a question myself. There isn't a man on this payroll with less religion than I got—so why did he cotton to me?*

In the ranch yard, Sturtevant got off his horse and turned it over to a little aging bald-headed man, and said to one of the punchers, "I want to see Moss Tozer and Herb Eller. If they're in their bunks tell'em to pull on their pants an' come out here."

Bain shucked his bronc of saddle and bridle and turned it loose in the corral and when he walked back across the expansive yard with Nate Raab he saw two men, half clad, coming out of the bunkhouse.

Over a dozen punchers formed a tight group and stared critically at Tozer and Eller. The boss asked, "Where were you with the claybank t'night, Herb?"

"In Rowley, Mr. Sturtevant," Eller said. "I can prove it easy enough. Left town around eleven-thirty."

"All right," Sturtevant snapped, and turned toward Tozer. "And where were you, Moss?"

The short and wiry man had to weigh his reply. "Just ridin' around, boss. I got restless."

"You smell like you was dragged out of a burning barn, Tozer," Sturtevant said heavily. "A claybank bearin' an Arrowhead brand was seen out there where the nesters were burned out. Talk fast and chew it fine!"

"I was—I run into a couple of Rockin' H punchers over by the Whetstones, Mr. Sturtevant. We had a fire goin' because it was chilly."

"The lie is in your eyes, Tozer!" Sturtevant said. "If I could prove you were there I'd drag you off to jail myself an' see you was hanged. Get your stuff together, I'm payin' you off!"

"A dozen men ride claybanks in this part of the country, Mr. Sturtevant," Tozer argued. "They could've read a brand wrong."

"Stop in at my office and I'll have your pay ready," Sturtevant said and walked away toward the ranch house.

"All right, the hell with this outfit," Tozer threw after the man. "There are other outfits." He strode toward the bunkhouse mumbling to himself.

Raab said, "A man was killed out there tonight an' in cold blood because he was protectin' his family and his property. Seems to me certain polecats should be hunted down an' made responsible. But Tozer gets to walk away—just like that."

"Like Sturtevant said, Nate. There ain't no real proof." Bain touched off a cigarette and studied Raab's stony countenance. "Man can have somethin' inside his head he is sure is true—an' still he don't know."

"That's so, Frank." He thought a moment, then added, "A man's face can change an' he can sometimes make his eyes look different—but a man's gait—it is somethin' I don't forget." Raab laughed with hardly any sound. "Men like Tozer are like horses an' generally have to be led or told to do certain things."

Bain, the unease gnawing at his midriff again, said irritably, "There's times, Nate, I could bend a gun over your head." He stepped aside to let Tozer pass and watched the man walk to the corral and there was nothing unusual in the man's rolling gait as far as he could see. All at once he wondered how he looked himself when he walked. He wished he could crawl inside Raab's head and do some backtrailing. Small wonder, he thought, that Christine Durst, that pretty girl in Rowley, was losing patience with Nathan Raab. It



is the future that interests a woman, especially when she is between twenty and thirty.

In his bunk, Bain's mind was too active to allow him instant rest. *Does a man who once wore two guns seem off-balance when he walks with only one in its holster? Whose gait had Raab really been studying?*

A puncher in the bunk above him offered his opinion regarding the firing of Moss Tozer. "Maybe we're goin' soft at that. Maybe Tozer's got guts. The nesters come out here an' string up wire an' it's no longer free range. They plow up the grass an' steal the ranchers blind. They—"

"Somebody said once that this was a free country," Nathan Raab interrupted. "Speakin' of guts, you ever ride through hell an' high water an' Injuns in a covered wagon?"

Somebody asked in the dark, "What made you a puncher, Raab, when you got a sod-buster's heart?"

"Shut up, you speechmakers," a sleepy voice growled. "We got a long day ahead of us."

FRANK BAIN lay awake for a long time, his mind still troubled. He wondered if a certain secret was all his own and just who had really been in a certain Idaho town one night about a year ago. The place where it happened had been mostly in darkness. Only one swinging lamp had been lit and no more than half a dozen men had been in the big room.

Nathan Raab, the way things stood between him and Christine, could use a thousand dollars. Bain's thin lips curled. *All right, Nate, if that's the way it is. It also serves my purpose to string along with you. A man is judged by the company he keeps an' you're no curly wolf.*

There were times when Nathan Raab asked Bain's advice. He sought some late the next afternoon as they rode over Sturtevant's immense plateau from the center of which no human eye could make out the outer rims. Along the watercourses thousands of cattle

grazed. "Is it your opinion I'm a fool t' keep courtin' the girl in Rowley, Frank? You saw her last night with Ray Overmire, an' she walked mighty close to him. He has means and could support a wife proud."

"An' I remember how she looked at you as they passed us," Bain said. He was pretty sure the girl loved Raab but was impatient to force the issue. "Women are hard to figure, Nate, like a toad on a hot rock or a bird on the wing. You're not a fool. Just a little too cautious an' practical."

"I should ask her pretty soon," Raab said. "But until I'm sure of somethin'—" He held the rest of the words in check and abruptly wheeled his horse around.

Bain's mouth stretched wider than it actually was and the urge was strong within him to get things clear in his mind. Hell, always something chasing a man. A posse or a conscience. If he'd had anything to say about brains when they had been made they would never be able to think back more than a few hours. Sometimes the law had a picture of a man to send around but mostly it was only a description. A half a dozen people can observe an event or a man briefly and afterwards when questioned, cannot fully agree as to what they saw. But if the man was brought back to face them once again. . . . Bain ran a thumbnail along the trimmed edge of his black mustache and watched Raab.

The puncher twisted in his saddle and looked back. "Goin' into Rowley t'night, Frank. You're welcome t' come along."

"I'll think it over on the way home, Nate," Bain said.

That night in town, after they'd secured their horses at the tie-rack, Raab said, "I'll see you in about an hour. Don't get into trouble."

"Do I look like a man who looks for it?" Bain countered, an edge to his voice. He got no answer, watched Raab cross the street and enter a square frame building housing the *Rowley Democrat*. That was where Christine



**Inner Sanctum\***  
©Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

**EVERYTHING YOU WANT IN A  
 WALLET... MAKES A PERFECT GIFT**

Clear windows for photos, secret pocket that hides and divides your large bills from prying eyes... all-round zipper closing... attractive colors... lovely gift box. And the famous booklet, *Secrets of Successful People*. At your store or write, Aristocrat Leather Products Co., 292 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N.Y.

**The Fastest Selling Wallet in America!**



worked. He smiled dryly and moved along the walk and in front of the sheriff's office he slowed his gait and caught a fragment of talk. "... I'm mighty sure I saw 'em here in town. The ones shot Vollmer down—can point 'em out—"

Frank Bain felt a building tension. Trouble was beginning to stew here and a premonition ran along his nerves. He went to the northernmost end of the town, then retraced his steps. When he passed the sheriff's office again it was empty. In front of the dry goods store Raab called to him.

"See Christine?" Bain asked.

"Gone ridin' in a hired rig with Overmire," Raab said. "I want to show you somethin' I had done."

Bain followed the man. Raab stopped in front of a small shop, the window of which announced in faded, peeling black letters, J. D. RISTER, PHOTOGRAPHER. "Aimin' to have pictures taken, Nate?"

"Just wanted to show you that," Raab said, and pointed.

Frank Bain saw the framed picture and the little tintype standing against it. The eyes, all the features in the crayon enlargement, were Nathan Raab's, if Raab had been twice as old as he really was, and wore a Lincoln-like beard.

"My father, Noah," Raab said. "The man did a real nice job, Frank. It's a crayon portrait."

Bain nodded, felt a weakness in his legs. "A salty man, Nate. Anybody ever saw him never would forget him." It was the natural thing to say, yet when the words were out he glanced quickly at Raab and had the uncanny feeling that he had taken them right off the puncher's tongue. The uncertainty of the moment was abruptly torn apart by the sound of a gunshot far down the street. Bain turned and ran and when he was abreast of the saloon Raab was keeping pace with him. They passed the express office and stopped suddenly in front of a wheelwright's shop.

A man staggered out of a dark areaway, bent at the knees. He coughed liquidly, pressed his hands against his chest and then fell flat on his face in the dust. Bain ran to him and knelt down, turned him gently over. "The nester I saw a while ago, Nate. He's dead."

Raab drew in his breath, held it. He removed his hat. "A bullet in his back, Frank. God rest his soul."

Bain was on his feet and moving toward the areaway when four men moved in. The tall paunchy man wearing the star yelled, "Keep your hands where I can see 'em, you rana-hans!"

Nathan Raab said, "You're a bigger fool than I figured, Gale. Take our guns an' smell

'em. How fast do you think a man gets the power stink out of 'em?"

Bain stepped up to the lawman. "He was one of the nesters, sheriff. He spotted a man who took part in that raid. Who tipped off a curly wolf?"

The sheriff swore violently. "You talk to me like that, you got to back it up."

"I saw the nester in your office," Bain said. "I heard a scrap of talk."

"You heard things comin' out of a bottle," Gale said flatly. "Get out of town."

"When I get back to the Arrowhead I'll talk to the boss about this," Bain snapped.

"This is murder. Sturtevant made you, Gale, and he can break you!"

Charlie Gale laughed and his stomach and jowls shook. Two of his men laughed with him. Finally Gale said, "Pick up the sod-buster and make arrangements to bury him," and turned toward Frank Bain again. "What was that you said about John Sturtevant?"

Nathan Raab said, "Let's go, Frank. We're just a couple of fool cowpunchers."

"Keep thinkin' that way," the sheriff snapped. "You'll live longer."

FRANK BAIN'S nerves were singing when he rode out of Rowley. Trouble for sure—and a deep and devious game. Yet he could not forget the crayon portrait in the window and he said to Nathan Raab, "What are you keeping inside your head, Nate? I don't cotton to a man who plays the cards close to his chest."

"Speak for yourself, Frank," Raab said, and suspicion and doubt pyramided in Bain's mind and told him to be wary. Raab added suddenly, "I wouldn't mention anything to the boss about what you have seen and heard."

Three nights later a Rocking H rider dropped in at a Sturtevant line camp and had coffee and a pipe before riding on. He was a garrulous man. "Bain, your boss must pay a mighty generous bonus when he fires a man. Saw a jigger used to ride for him in Olneyville yesterday. Name of Tozer. His pockets were full an' he was buyin' for everybody come into Cantrill's. Let me know when Sturtevant needs a good wrangler."

Raab turned away from the stove. "The boss took on three men only this mornin', friend. They didn't have the smell of cows on 'em. How fast are you with a gun?"

Bain said, "You jump too quick after lookin', Nate," but kept his eyes fixed to the floor.

"There's no mistakin' some men," Raab said. "You see one, you see 'em all. Men like Fargo Vance an' Del McQueen."

The Rocking H puncher laughed shortly. "You won't never see them two again, Nate. I understand few men know who gunned



them down. The jigger came an' went as fast as he shot, they said. Heard McQueen took a little time t' die an' give a man's name."

"Cole Storrey," Nathan Raab said.

A muscle in Frank Bain's lean face jumped and he was glad he was looking at the floor. The Rocking H puncher said, "Well, I'll be gettin' along. Thanks for the coffee."

Wheels within wheels. Bain never remembered Moss Tozer when the man hadn't been making the rounds, trying to get money enough together to have a time for himself in Rowley. Nate Raab would be thinking of that, too, among other things. The silence that followed the Rocking H hand's departure shook Bain and sawed at his nerves.

He lifted his head and said angrily, "You see a stake, Nate? You can ask a girl a question when you get it? I hope it'll be money your conscience will allow you to enjoy—and keep your body and soul together."

Raab poured himself a cup of coffee, then turned away from the little iron stove. "Now who is talkin' riddles, Frank? You're jumpy."

Bain said, "You'll tell me what I want to know, Nate, and now! I got a feelin'. It's in my mind I'm caught in the middle. I'll be riding out of this valley before morning, Nate, if I have to leave you dead here on the floor. You don't forget a man's walk, huh? You saw Cole Storrey kill two gunmen one night. But until the doubt is gone from your mind—"

"Frank, it would be murder. I never turn a gun toward any man," Nathan Raab said, and his face was calm.

"Then how do you expect to get that price that's on my head, friend?"

Raab slowly shook his head. "It never occurred to me to collect it, Frank. All right, I see I got to put you straight about somethin'. Afterward, you'll maybe kill me."

"Maybe," Frank Bain said. "Go on, Nate. Talk."

"We came all the way from Missouri in covered wagons nearly twenty years ago, Frank, the Raabs an' a dozen other families lookin' for a spot to take root. We got as far as Arizona near the Black Hell mountains and made camp. Just as the sun was comin' up the Apaches jumped us. I was eight years old then—but the picture has stayed in my mind. The night before, one of our scouts rode out an' spotted a cow camp about three miles away an' so we felt reasonably safe. Durin' the attack my father broke loose, took an arrow in the ribs, but got through the 'Pache lines. We waited for help but it never came."

Frank Bain spat the stub of a cold cigarette at the dirt floor. He became impatient at Raab's pause. "Go on, Nate."

"I was the only one left alive when the

Injuns left. I was under the hind end of a dead horse piled up against the remains of a Conestoga wagon. I lay there for about two hours, too scairt to move, when a dozen riders showed up. Three of them got off their broncos and walked toward where I was pinned. They was grinnin'—an' they were white men, Frank. It was the tall man with the heavy mustache who laughed out loud an' said, 'The 'Patches saved us a heap of trouble, boys. That sodbuster with the arrow stickin' out of him figured 'fore he died that we'd run to the rescue. Hope this'll teach the damned nesters they ain't welcome here.' "

Bain looked at Raab, almost unbelieving.

"I crawled away when they'd gone. They didn't bother to bury any of the dead. I finally made it to a railroad camp. I was only a kid an' they figured I was ravin' some. Afterwards I found out who the man was that laughed, Frank. Roy Tunstall, foreman for Jake Goodall."

"That name is in books," Frank Bain said. "He was nearly as big as John Chisum, that Goodall."

Raab nodded. "It's in a book that he died three years later an' when authorities busted into his big safe for his heirs an' found it empty—an' Tunstall had disappeared. I've been after him ever since, always keepin' in mind that I saw my own baby sister scalped in front of my eyes, Frank."

"You've found him, Nate?"

"I'm sure of it now," Raab said, his usually mild eyes afire. "He asked about the picture in Rister's window, Frank. He never forgot the face of Noah Raab."

Bain felt suddenly cold. He said in little more than a whisper, "John Sturtevant."

Nathan Raab nodded. "He got himself a good start with Goodall's money an' his worry for nesters is a rotten and hellish bluff. He burned them out and he is still killing them, Frank. Yes, he's changed, but I never forgot his gait."

FRANK BAIN saw the danger Raab was in and it also occurred to him that his own life was not worth a picayune. Nathan Raab knew what he had been and had deliberately dealt him a hand in this grim game of cat and mouse. Nathan was a deeply religious man and could not kill and so had seen in him the instrument he could not make of himself. He knew he was caught in the middle. He got up and kicked a chair aside and dropped his hand to his six-gun. "So you got yourself a killer, Nate!"

Raab dropped his head in his hands. "That is so, Frank. I started out using you for a purpose and I intended to hold the shooting of Fargo Vance and McQueen over you if you refused to take a hand. But—you've become



my closest friend. Still, it's too late to turn back. I've got you in as deep as me."

"Get this straight, Nate," Bain said. "I readied myself for ten years for the killing of just two men. They murdered my brother. After I'd paid off I wanted no more of it, you understand? I threw one of my guns away."

Raab said, "It's good to hear that, Frank. You know when I started looking for this man, Tunstall, when I was a little over sixteen, I talked things over with a preacher. He agreed that a man like Tunstall should be destroyed, but that it was not in my heart to do it. He said there are men who like peace and have no stomach for violence, but at the same time there had to be men of a kind whose business it was to see that the meek got that peace and security. Each one needed the other and who was to judge?"

"A man has to have a reason to kill," Bain said. "I have no quarrel with Sturtevant."

"How long do you think you'll outlast me, Frank?" Raab said. "You could start riding now and I will be the one to die, not Tunstall. Where would there be justice in that?"

Bain felt like laughing, but controlled himself with a mighty effort. Bewilderment and anger fogged his mind and he saw Raab backing slowly away from him, and for the first time since he had met the man, saw all hope gone from his eyes. Nate showed no fear. He seemed to expect a bullet through his heart.

"You got time to get out of this valley, Frank," Nate said. "Sturtevant'll show his hand mighty soon. Funny, ain't it? I'm afraid t' kill but not afraid t' die."

Bain shook his head slowly from side to side and dropped down on an old wooden bench. "Nate, I'm not half the man you are. I'd never tried t' catch a grizzly bear with only my bare hands, with just the hope somebody would come along packin' a gun. It is plain to me why you can't ask Christine a question. I'm a fool to stay, Nate, but I feel sorry for that girl."

"Thanks a heap, Frank." Raab went to the little dusty window and looked out into the dark. "The odds are heavy against you and if you spoke the name of Tunstall in Sturtevant's presence, you'd be dead before you got past the first syllable. I figure the three men he took on—"

"I'm thinking of that, too," Frank Bain said. "They won't lose any time. He—what is it, Nate?"

Raab was listening. He rubbed a dirty window pane with the heel of his hand and looked out into the night. "I thought I heard horses, Frank."

Bain jumped to his feet. "We're fools, Nate. Sturtevant could have spotted us here tonight."

Raab came away from the window, his face pale in the thin lantern light. "Here," he said. "Take my six-gun, Frank, or I might—"

"Leave it in the holster, Nate. Just stand on my left if company comes—don't forget that. I don't want to telegraph any salty hombres that I'm a two-gun man." He ran to the door, opened it a few inches and listened. He heard the steady thud of steel-shod hoofs, the rattle of a bit chain, and a man's guarded voice. Eyes shining too bright, he turned and faced Raab. "The company is comin'. Keep a poker face. Does the boss carry a gun?"

"Yes, inside his coat," Raab said. "I've never known him to use it."

"It'll be your job to jump Sturtevant—keep him busy," Frank Bain said. "Soon as you feel me draw your gun, cut loose. They are walkin' this way now. I'll go out and meet them sociable-like. Be ready."

HE STEPPED outside and saw Sturtevant, Sheriff Gale, and two of the three restless-fingered men the Arrowhead boss had recently put on the payroll. He thought grimly, every sense alert, *Two of you gunslingers! Vance and McQueen were as good as six of you. And you, sheriff, you're fat an' slow.* . . .

Aloud he said, "Evenin', boss. What has happened?"

"We want Raab," Gale said, and the two men backing him up stopped and leaned against the side of a low out-building. Sturtevant kept step with the lawman, then stopped six feet away. "Raab," he called loudly, "come out here."

Nathan Raab came out and seemed puzzled. He stood close to Frank Bain. "The sheriff said he wanted me, Mr. Sturtevant. Why?"

"Horse stealin'," Gale said. "Now we know where you used to go them nights. We've got the trader in jail you sold 'em to, back in town. We found the cash you got for 'em in your bunk. You knew a man in Rowley was beatin' your time with a girl and you had to have the cash to ask her to marry you, that right?"

Sturtevant said, "I never figured this about you, Raab. You know you'll hang for this."

"I figured that was the idea," Raab said, and Bain saw the gunmen come out of their slouch. They would be looking at Nathan Raab and waiting for him to make a play.

At the moment Frank Bain hated Sturtevant as much as did Nathan Raab. There was not a trace of tremor in the man standing close to him and he knew Raab was as brave as any man who dared to use a gun. There was a thin moon in the sky and pale yellow light fanned out through the open door. He



took a quick breath as Gale said, "Step out here, Raab. We're takin' you in."

Bain quickly stepped away from Raab, a gun in each hand. He placed both of his bullets where others were not needed and then swung his guns toward Gale who had been slowed up by the shock of the unexpected action, the lightning swiftness of his shooting. Gale's face was ashen in the thin light and he tried to drop his gun before a heavy slug tore half of his shoulder away and sent him staggering backward, screaming.

Nathan Raab came catapulting away from Sturtevant, the wind knocked out of him, and the wild-eyed cattleman threw a wild shot at Frank Bain. Bain yelled, "You won't die quick, Tunstall," and drove a bullet into the desperate man's leg and rocked him off balance. He fired again and Sturtevant went down.

Nathan Raab said, "You should have made sure everybody was dead out on the plain that day, Tunstall. Saved you a heap of trouble, them Apaches, huh? You had them nesters burned out an' killed. Gale worked along with you, didn't he, Tunstall?"

The man who called himself Sturtevant raised himself to one elbow, his face pasty and running sweat. He looked at his dead gunmen, at the groveling Charlie Gale, then fell heavily on his face.

"Got to get him on a horse, Nate," Frank Bain said. "There's a deputy marshal in Olneyville he's got to talk to. Get some rags an' we'll keep him from bleedin' to death."

Nathan Raab nodded. He looked down at Ray Tunstall for fully a minute, reveling in a grim dream come true and breathing against skinned knuckles that had nearly broken the man's jaw.

He said, oddly, "God bless you, Frank," and went into the cabin.

Charlie Gale asked painfully, "Give me a break, Bain. I'll give you my word I'll tell all I know if—"

"You'll tell anyway," Bain said. "How the nesters were burned out an' who killed the man in Rowley. You've got nothin' I want to buy." He turned away from the man and Raab, coming out of the cabin, yelled a warning. Spinning around, Bain saw Gale coming up on his knees and the sheriff held a gun. He felt a heavy blow against his ribs as he placed a bullet between Gale's eyes. Nausea tearing at him, he stumbled toward Raab. "Mighty close, Nate. A man shouldn't turn his back on a snake that ain't dead."

"He hit you bad, Frank?"

"Only a skin burn—look, this Tunstall won't never make it by horseback. You go to Olneyville an' get the deputy marshal—an' a doctor. No tellin' if some Arrowhead punchers will follow out here. Hurry it up!"

"Frank, let me look at where that bullet hit!"

"Get movin', will you, Nate? Say a little prayer for me on the way. An' tell Him the next time one of his strays gets himself over a barrel—Frank Bain hopes he won't be so close to hand."

Raab said, "All right, Frank. No arguin' with you."

Nearly a half hour later, after he'd put a tourniquet on Tunstall's thigh and had tied the man's hands, Bain had very little vital sap left in him. He used that up loading his guns and getting into the line cabin where he caved in.

Bain did not open his eyes until late that afternoon. Loss of blood and want of sleep, somebody was saying, and he tried to sit up and get his eyes into focus. Everything around him seemed to undulate as if it were under water. Voices were jumbled at first but soon he isolated a pair, Nathan Raab's and a girl's. Slowly things began to take tangible shape and the plugs were pulled out of his ears. He discovered that he was in a bed. He heard the racket of traffic outside the window.

"You're in Rowley, Frank," Raab said. "Just listen t' me. The marshal tacked a legal paper up out at the Arrowhead an' it's bein' operated by the government until further notice. Some gents are already in jail or runnin' for cover."

"Tunstall," Bain said. "Did he talk?"

"He sure did. The doctor says he'll be in shape t' hang."

Frank Bain closed his eyes and took a long deep breath. "Nate, have you asked Christine?"

"Reckon it was the first thing I attended to."

"Where's the doc? Ask him how soon I can be ridin', Nate."

Raab said, "There's a lawman's badge pinned to your shirt, Frank. The deputy marshal put it there an hour ago. Come off Charlie Gale, but you can polish the smell from it. You're actin' sheriff until he can make it permanent."

Frank Bain was too sick to grin, or obey the impulse to get out of bed and strangle Nate with his own sweatrag. "Tell Richardson he's hired a man, Nate," he said, and Raab's girl leaned over and kissed him.

The doctor said, "All of you get out an' let him rest."

The touch of Christine's lips made something very clear in Bain's mind. A man did not really exist until he had sole rights to a woman's caress, and to get that, he had to stay in one place and take root. His fingers strayed to the badge of authority pinned to his chest and he began to feel mighty good.



By LEE E. WELLS



## CHAPTER ONE

### Guns Sow the Seed

*"Red man and white man are brothers under war paint, mister—but nothin' will cover yellow!"*

THE Indian had stepped out of the bushes without warning, his right palm raised, the rifle dangling in his left and pointing to the ground. Greg Patton reined in and he heard Ples Damon's muffled curse as the burly rancher pulled up beside him. In a moment, Hack Edwards drifted close and he spoke swiftly from the corner of his mouth.

"Should I cut him down?"

"We'll parley," Damon answered. "If



Hack's second slug  
dropped the Apache...



# Red Man's Reckoning

Jessup's done his work right, there'll be no real trouble."

The Diamond D beef came plodding on and Damon reined off to one side to let the herd go by. Greg noticed that the young Indian's eyes glittered angrily for a second and then veiled. He wore agency clothing, a cheap white shirt and coarse trousers that partially covered the typical high Apache moccasin, and he spoke in good English with just a hint of the Apache guttural.

"Stop your beef. This is Indian land," he said.

"Sure," Damon nodded and his thick lips moved in a smile that had no warmth. "Sure,

it's reservation graze, but we've made a dicker to bring in our cows."

Hack Edwards had hardly moved his horse when Damon and Greg drifted toward the Indian, and this put him some distance over to the left. The Indian shook his head.

"I know of the agreement with Mr. Jessup. But you have already run in too many cows for the graze we have. Turn back."

"Now look," Damon said heavily and he leaned forward so that the saddlehorn pressed into his thick paunch, "I know what I'm doing and no damn' Apache's gonna change my mind. This beef goes up to Spanish Meadow, savvy?"

"We want no trouble," the Apache said evenly, though Greg noted the slight angry set of his lips. "Hold your beef here, and you and I will go to Mr. Jessup."

"Like hell!" Damon snorted. The Apache's hand tightened on the rifle.

"Turn back."

Damon's eyes cut toward Hack Edwards and then back to the Indian. He settled back in the saddle and his sneer grew wider.

"You aim to make us?"

The Indian whirled toward the passing herd, his rifle jumping to his shoulder. Damon jerked and, for a split second, Greg thought he would be forced to take a hand to protect the young Apache. His hand dipped down toward his holster, brown eyes hard on Ples Damon. It was Hack Edwards he should have watched.

Hack's first bullet caught the rifle stock and smashed the weapon out of the Indian's hands; his second slug dropped the Apache. Greg whirled, lean face set and angry, his fingers wrapped tightly around his Colt handle. His brown eyes blazed at Hack, who grinned crookedly.

"Hell, don't let it bother you, Patton." His pinched face tightened suspiciously. "Or maybe you're an Injun lover?"

Damon said heavily, "Patton'll learn how we do things. Who's he to talk, anyhow?"

Greg remembered then that he had a price on his head. He choked down his anger and took his hand from his gun. He was a tall man with a high-angled, lean face, clear brown eyes set well apart. He shrugged and managed a wry grin.

"Hell, I still get nervous when guns go off." He swung out of the saddle and joined Ples Damon, who stood over the fallen Indian.

EDWARDS' bullet had caught the Apache in the chest and Greg could tell at a glance the man was hard hit and probably would not live long. The redskin glared balefully up at Damon and then his eyes moved to Greg, his hatred blazing on both. His breathing was labored and a red froth appeared on his lips. But he made no sound. Hack came up, coolly blowing through the gun barrel and reloading. There was nothing but a sharp, critical judgment of his own shooting in Hack's stubbled face.

"A mite high and to the right," he said. "I got to allow for that." He holstered his Colt and looked inquiringly at Damon. "You don't aim to leave him here? If his friends find him, maybe even Jessup won't be able to do you much good."

"No, we won't leave him," Damon said. He looked around the brush-covered slopes that rose steeply toward the high San Diman Peaks. The herd moved placidly on toward

Spanish Meadow. Ples rubbed his pudgy hand reflectively along his jaw, equably watching the Indian die.

Greg stood aloof and silent, fighting down the anger that boiled inside him. His hands ached to lift his Colt and put a gunman's challenge to Hack Edwards for this brutal, unnecessary killing. But for the time being he had to work with the greedy, ruthless rancher and his hired, snake-cold killer.

"There's a rimrock about a mile west of here," Damon said as he turned to Hack. "Reckon you could make it look like he slipped and fell to them sharp rocks down below?"

"With a bullet hole in him?" Hack demanded. He shook his head. "His friends has damn' sharp eyes, Ples. I got a better idea. Patton, get him up across your horse."

Greg stiffened then turned and walked to his mount, with long strides, his back ramrod straight. *I've got to remember*, he told himself, *that I'm a long-looper on the dodge—I'm a killing son who's used to murder. . . .* He led the horse back and saw that the Apache had died without a sound, and the glazing eyes still seemed to hold the ghost of the man's consuming hatred.

The horse was skittish, but the three men placed the limp body across the saddle and they waited until the small horse cavy came up and Greg obtained another mount. Without a word, Damon moved into the lead, heading across the cattle trail toward the north and west. Greg followed, leading the horse that carried the dead Apache, and Hack Edwards brought up the rear.

Soon the sounds of the herd died away and Greg noticed that both Damon and Edwards constantly eyed every possible place of ambush and watched the skyline. Greg, too, felt some of their nervousness. If they were found by some of the Apaches there would be a fight first and explanations afterwards, and Greg had no illusions as to his own position if he were caught with these men.

The way became steeper as Ples Damon headed into the draws, steadily climbing toward a high, jagged peak. At last they could no longer see the mountain as the canyon walls closed grimly in around them. Vegetation was gone now and there remained only the harsh rocks, the high walls of the draw.

They threaded a narrow arroyo and suddenly came out on a level stretch of ground high up on the shoulder of the peak. Greg looked over the rim onto a wide expanse of rolling country below him, and he could almost pick out the individuals ranches that bordered the San Diman Reservation. Then his eyes dropped lower and he saw jagged rocks at the bottom of the cliff. Hack dismounted and walked to the edge, peered down.

"Them rocks'll smash him up bad," he said



thoughtfully, "and it'll be some time before he's found."

"The bullet hole," Damon snapped. Hack shrugged.

"No way of hiding that—if he's found. Pitch him over and we'll see where he lands."

"Get to it, Patton," Damon ordered.

Greg stepped away and his wide lips made a straight line above his rocky chin. He shook his head as Hack Edwards turned. The gunhawk's thin brows arched in surprise and he looked at Damon.

"He's damn' squeamish. Maybe we better teach him a lesson."

Greg half turned, his right hand hovering over his holster. Hack read the unspoken challenge and his slate gray eyes grew cold as his lips moved back from his teeth. Ples Damon's heavy voice cut in.

"Not so fast, Hack. I reckon I understand how he feels. You and me can take care of the Injun."

Damon grunted as he dropped his weight from the saddle. Hack glared at Greg for a long minute, then his thin shoulders lifted slightly and he joined his boss. Greg deliberately turned his back on the two men. At this very moment they had laid themselves wide open to a murder charge but Greg clung tightly to the thought that there were greater things at stake.

Greg heard Hack and Ples Damon shuffling around behind him and he could trace, by the sound, their approach to the cliff edge. There was a long silence and then Hack chuckled, a sound that sent an involuntary chill down Greg's back.

"Luck! You can't see him between the rocks. Now all we got to do is mess up the trail and we're in the clear."

"Patton," Damon said, his voice a little strained from exertion, "don't get any ideas about this, like talking too much."

Greg shrugged and turned around. The Indian's body was not in sight. Hack's eyes narrowed and Greg could tell the man was

still of half a mind to pick a fight. Damon's bulging eyes rested squarely on Greg and he waved his hand toward the cliff edge.

"If that damn' Injun's ever found, Patton, you'll hang for it."

"Me?" Greg asked.

Damon nodded heavily and Hack was grinning again.

"You. Me and Hack saw you do the killing, leastways that's what we'll tell the sheriff. Jessup, the Injun Agent, will back the story—I reckon—about trouble between you and that jasper down there."

Greg could only stare at him. "But the crew—"

Damon chuckled. "Hell, there ain't a man on the crew I couldn't get hung tomorrow. I like a set up like that—saves a heap of augerment and trouble. They'll know who killed the Injun—after I've given orders."

Greg nearly laughed, caught himself and tried to act both incredulous and a little fearful. He evidently succeeded for Damon jerked his thumb toward the horse.

"You head back to the ranch and stay there—unless you want to get clean out of the country."

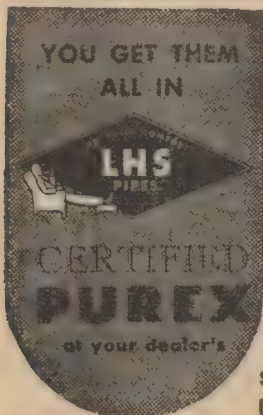
"I might as well vamose," Greg said.

DAMON shook his head. "You don't savvy it right. Me and Hack won't say nothing unless we have to. So long as you work for Diamond D, there ain't going to be no lawman snooping on your trail—I'll see to that. But if you don't like our outfit, just ride. You'll add a murder charge to them killings of yours below the border."

"You feel damn' safe!" Greg said slowly.

"None safer. I know where I stand. Head back to the ranch. We'll be along in four-five days."

Greg turned and walked to his horse, lifting himself into the saddle with easy grace. Damon and Hack watched him as he neck-reined and started back down the trail. At last the canyon mouth swallowed Greg and a



## THE BIGGEST VALUE IN PIPES!



Send for free Booklet—"Pipes for a World of Pleasure"  
L & W Stern, Inc., Dept. AC, 56 Pearl St., Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

\$3.50 Model No. 14.  
Dozens of other  
handsome models.  
Plain or antique.

smile played along his lips. When he was safely out of sight, he laughed aloud.

Then he thought of reasons for this—of the cold blooded killing of the Apache who had done no more than protect his tribal land and ask for simple justice—and his fist tightened on the reins until the knuckles showed white.

There'd be a hangnoose waiting to pay for that little job.

**H**E CAME out of the draws and headed along the back trail toward the Diamond D ranch, a wide expanse of rich graze just beyond the borders of the reservation. Greg rode steadily, with no deviation from his course. Neither Hack Edwards nor Ples Damon were fools and they'd likely trail him for a long distance to make sure.

Two hours later Greg drew rein and twisted around in the saddle. For several miles now he had been riding across open country and not far ahead would be a Diamond D line shack. As far as Greg could see, no one trailed him. He rode on.

In less than an hour he sighted the line shack, marking the place where Damon's domain and the San Diman Apache Reservation joined. A lanky gunslinger with a drooping eyelid loafed in the shadow of the shack and he looked up with mild curiosity as Greg came up.

"Something wrong?" he asked, as Greg dismounted.

"Nothing. The boss sent me back to the spread." The gunhawk questioned him no further but squinted out over the sun drenched grass. Greg wondered what this Abe Bowers had done that gave Damon a hold over him. Abe sighed wearily.

"This is plumb tiresome. I wished I could have trailed into the reservation and get a little excitement if the Injuns had kicked up a fuss."

"It's just as exciting here," Greg said and sat down on the bench. Abe grunted in disgust, then shook his head.

"You'd think them Injuns would get riled," he said, "as many beef as Damon's shoving onto the reservation. Of course, he's got some sort of arrangement with Jessup but one agent ain't going to stop them Apaches once they see they're being tricked. I expected it before this."

"What was that deal about grazing?" Greg asked, keeping the right tone of indifferent curiosity in his voice.

"The way I heard it, the ranchers hereabouts was permitted to put two thousand head on the reservation grass. The Apaches was to get fifty cents a month a head, the ranchers paying it in to Jessup. The four big spreads around here could graze five hundred head each."

"Damon's run in more than that," Greg said. Abe looked around at him and grinned slowly.

"Hell, Damon's always taking more'n his share of everything. Between him and the others, I reckon there's close to twelve thousand head on San Diman. They've forced Indian goats, horses and beef clean into the broken country on the eastern side of the reservation."

"Twelve thousand means an overgraze," Greg said.

"Damon claims that San Diman country's too damn' good for a bunch of scurvy Injuns, nohow. He figures if him and his neighbors can't have it, they can ruin it." Abe sighed and stretched. "That's what he's talking, but I figure there's something else behind it, otherwise why would Jessup tie into a deal that will end his job for him?"

"I don't know," Greg said. Abe glanced at the sun, well down toward the west and he suggested Greg stay over in the line shack until morning.

Abe Bowers, believing he talked to a renegade like himself, spun yarns that would have hung him ten times over if the local lawman had heard him. Greg stored the information away for later use. He was more than glad to hit his blankets when at long last Abe yawned and suggested they turn in.

Greg lay in the narrow bunk and reviewed what little he had learned since he had come to the San Diman country. This case had started a month ago when he had been ordered to Tucson to report to Colonel Sipe, who would give him the scanty background on the Indian agency. Greg's superior had been very emphatic on certain points.

"The Army has asked for our help, Patton, and we're giving it to them. Colonel Sipe will give you such facts as he has, no more. Any instructions he may give you will be followed only if they do not conflict with the situation you find. This is a delicate mission, involving two departments of the Federal Government, so govern yourself accordingly."

Gray-haired and peppery Colonel Sipe had confirmed the delicacy of the mission a few days later.

"We've got a small post up there on the borders of San Diman," he said, "and Captain Leger has a good idea what's going on. But we can do nothing unless we are requested by the Indian agent, Archer Jessup in this case. There's trouble brewing up on San Diman and we'd like to stop it before it starts. We can't."

"Why?" Greg had asked. Sipe snorted and leaned over his desk, his gray eyes hard and cold.

"Because Jessup, in some way, stands to profit from the trouble. He made this grazing



deal with the ranchers and the contract is fair enough for the Indian Bureau to approve of it. But Jessup is apparently stone blind to what the ranchers are doing to that contract—stone blind or damned willing. Why's what I want to find out, and that's your job, Patton. As a U. S. deputy marshal, you can go where the Army can't in this instance."

Patton had headed northeast out of Tucson into the broken country that extended on to Springville and into New Mexico. Captain Leger had more details to add.

"Ples Damon, I think, is the man you should watch. I'm personally very suspicious of a man who has a cold-eye gunslammer as a segundo and whose crew is almost wholly made up of gunhawks."

"The law?" Greg had asked.

Leger shrugged. "Damon owns it in this part of the country. Don't underrate the man. He's got power and he's been able to persuade every other rancher to follow his lead in throwing beef on San Diman. Jessup's in his power or pay somehow. Here's the list of ranchers in the area."

Greg glanced at the few names, his eyes instantly arrested by one. "Ruth Cronin—a woman!"

"And pretty as they come," Leger smiled. He sobered. "She took over the Currycomb when her father died, and she's proved she knows the cattle business. But she can be as stubborn as she is pretty, and somehow Damon has talked her into this deal."

Greg returned the list to Leger's desk and arose. "If you hear Damon has hired a new gunhawk from down below the border, don't be surprised," he said. "No one in this part of the country knows me—an' years ago they fixed me up with a record. I should be able to get away with it."

"You'll report to me?" Leger asked sharply.

"I'll let you know if I need help," Greg said and left the office before Leger could argue the point.

It had not been too hard to get on the Diamond D payroll, though Greg had been sharply and shrewdly questioned by Damon and Hack. Convinced, finally, Greg had a reward on his head, he had been taken on and here he was.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Blood Barter

**A**CTUALLY he had learned very little. It was obvious that Damon and the others flooded the reservation with beef and Greg had witnessed a killing. That was all. He had no inkling of Jessup's full part, had not even met the agent, nor did

Greg know if the other ranchers were only Damon's tools or actually as deeply in the game as he. Greg finally gave up and drifted off to sleep.

After breakfast the next morning he saddled up and headed toward the Diamond D home ranch. He topped a ridge and then another, dropped into the narrow valley beyond. Instantly he cut a sharp angle to the trail and headed due north. With Damon and Edwards busy at San Diman and Abe Bowers reporting Greg had ridden on to the ranch, Patton had a few free days to pry into other angles of the case.

He knew that sooner or later the body of the dead Indian would be found. When it was, there would be hell breaking loose unless the anger of the Apaches could be diverted to the real killers. Greg wasn't exactly sure how he could turn that trick, but it had to be done to save a lot of useless murders.

About noon he was sure he was riding Currycomb graze and turned again, heading for the reservation, several miles north of the place where Damon herded his beef. He rode at a fast and steady trot and soon he entered the reservation lands. There was a low series of hills just ahead that would slope into the rich valleys beyond, almost knee high with grass.

He headed toward a shallow pass in the hills, intending to make a wide circuit around Diamond D and reach the Apache wickiups that were scattered in a great half moon around the agency itself. He had a half formed plan of approaching the Indians directly, talking to one of the tribal chiefs. If he could not do that, then his only alternative would be to report the killing to Captain Leger so that the cavalry would be alert for trouble.

Almost to the pass, Gregg abruptly drew rein. A few yards ahead of him was a fresh trail, the ground churned by hundreds of hoofs. A cattle herd had gone this way in what Greg judged to be a matter of an hour or so before.

His lean jaw tightened as he eyed the trail. That would be Ruth Cronin and the Currycomb beef, also invading San Diman. Greg wondered angrily how much cattle she intended throwing onto the reservation. The trail led toward the pass and Greg did some swift calculating, knowing the relative speed of the slow-moving cattle.

He neck-reined off the trail and set the spurs. Little swales and ridges hid him from the herd as he penetrated deeper and deeper into Apache country. Finally he headed directly for the pass, sure that he was ahead of the Currycomb. He cautiously approached the pass, finally dismounting, pulling his rifle from the boot and going the last few hundred

yards afoot. If he could throw a scare into Miss Ruth Cronin and the Currycomb riders, they might turn the beef back to their own range.

Greg cautiously approached the rim and looked down on the narrow pass. Just below him was a bush-choked ledge and then, below that, the pass itself. Greg settled himself to wait, drawing back from the rim. The cattle would make enough noise to give him plenty of advance warning.

Half an hour later he heard the first faint sounds of the approaching herd. He grimly picked up his rifle, slipped to the ledge and lay flat beneath a bush, eyes centered on the canyon below. If he could throw a few wild shots, enough to turn back Currycomb, and not be seen, he could keep up his masquerade with Damon. Greg settled himself, rifle in his hands.

A rider came into sight and he lifted the rifle, then dropped it. He could see the girl's face very clearly, the dark eyes, the full lips, the fine set of her shoulders and the lovely curves that the loose blouse could not fully conceal. Greg's eyes widened.

Some impulse made him look down on the ledge below. A rifle barrel slid silently out of the bushes down there and Greg realized someone was taking deadly aim at the girl. He had but a second of time and he acted without thinking. He dropped the rifle, came to a crouch and dropped over the rim, his spiked bootheels aimed directly at the spot where the killer must be lying.

The bushes clutched and ripped at him, but Greg plunged through. He had a glimpse of the girl's face turned upward, startled, wide-eyed. Then the clawing limbs blinded him and he struck a glancing blow at a body that rolled violently to one side.

A hoarse voice cursed in amazement. Greg struck the ledge, clawed a wild second for balance, then whipped around and threw himself on the rifleman. The Apache, for so he appeared to be, swung wildly with his rifle. But Greg came in under it, fingers taloning for a grip on the naked body.

There was not much room on the ledge and the man threw himself back against the cliff's face. Greg's fingers caught momentarily then slipped off. His shoulders smashed into the Indian, who had dropped the rifle. The man brought his hand, palm edged, in a vicious blow at Greg's exposed neck. Lights flashed in Greg's brain and he could not stop himself from falling. He hit the ground, started twisting around. He had a momentary glimpse of the Indian's snarling face and realized the man had blue eyes.

Then the world dropped out from under him as he rolled off the ledge and fell toward the canyon floor. His fingers clawed at the

blurring walls. He caught momentarily on a boulder, clung there for a moment until the rock pulled free of the dirt and fell with him. But now he had his feet under him and he bent his knees to catch the shock of landing.

He hit hard, the impact traveling up his spine and jarring his skull. His momentum threw him backward before he could catch himself. His head snapped back and crashed into a solid object. Without warning, night rushed in on his brain and he knew nothing more.

WHEN his eyes opened he looked up into the tanned face of a cowboy. Then the girl came close and looked down at him. Greg blinked and tried to sit up, but pain lanced through his head and made him sick. He sank back, closing his eyes tightly.

"He'll be all right," the girl said in a soft voice. Greg fought down the pain and his mind cleared. He looked up again, grinned faintly and very gingerly sat erect. The canyon made a slow circle around him and then steadied.

"Can you make it, pilgrim?" the cowboy asked. Greg nodded and pain constricted his temples. Then that passed and, with the help of the puncher and the girl, he pulled himself carefully to his feet. He looked up the canyon wall to the ledge above, saw the marks of his fall. If the boulder had not stopped him for a brief second, he would have been killed.

"What happened to—?" he started.

"The Indian?" the girl finished. "He got away. Slim, here, took a shot at him but missed."

The girl stared curiously at him and Greg looked up at the ledge.

"I happened to be up there and saw the jasper," he said. "Sorry he got away. What are you doing to rile up reservation Apaches?"

Her chin came up in a flash and then she smiled, the anger leaving as quickly as it came. "I'm Ruth Cronin of the Currycomb. We were taking beef to Indian graze."

"This Injun was out to stop you."

"We have a contract," she said stiffly.

Greg grinned crookedly from her to Slim. "How many head over the contract have you thrown in here?"

"Mr. Damon said that we could—" she broke off and stared narrowly at him. "Just who are you?"

"Greg Patton, lately come to the Diamond D. But I don't know how long I'll stay. When a man starts playing loose on his promise to Apaches like Damon is—and maybe you—I don't aim to stick around when the Injuns call the tally."

The girl considered him, her cool eyes endeavoring to read his face. At last she



shrugged and gave quiet orders to the puncher to ride on and join the herd.

She said with emphasis, "Currycomb handles its own business in its own way."

The cowboy grinned and walked to his horse. He mounted and rode on down the canyon and Greg faced the girl alone. She was again studying him, a puzzled frown slowly deepening between her eyes.

"You're Damon's man," she said, "but you talk like you're pulling against him. You don't look like the average run of hand he hires. I have respect for Damon's business ability, but no liking at all for his crew. Just who are you?"

Greg shifted his weight. "Another drifter, let's say. A gent who's smelled gunsmoke down wind before and who ain't blind because he's greedy for graze."

"Hard talk, Mr. Patton," Ruth said, flushing.

"Hard facts," Greg answered. "It's your business, but I'd sort of ask myself why Damon would urge me to run more beef into an Indian reservation. Damon, I'd figure, is the kind who looks out for himself first and gives just the leavings to anyone else. Suit yourself."

"Suppose I report this talk to Damon?" she demanded. Greg smiled.

"You'd get me fired, ma'am. You might even get me in a gun fight with some of the Diamond D boys." He glanced up at the ledge. "Call it doing you a favor against my better judgement and my boss."

She stared at him and then smiled. The movement of her lips heightened her beauty.

"You've checked the bet back to me very neatly. I won't talk to Damon about this." She sobered and a touch of her determination put an edge to her voice. "But I'm still grazing beef just this side of Spanish Meadow. You can tell Damon that when you see him. Good day, sir, and my thanks for flushing out that skulking Apache."

She turned and strode to her horse, mounted with an easy grace. Greg stood watching her, touched his hat brim in answer to her brief wave as she wheeled and rode off.

When she was gone, he gingerly touched the sore spot on the back of his head and searched the canyon wall for a way to the top. He found a break in the cliffs several yards away and set himself to the climb. He reached the top, sweating and panting a little. The dust cloud of the Currycomb beef still hung in the air.

Greg recovered his rifle and placed it in the scabbard. He mounted and scouted the rim and, a few minutes later, found where the bushwhacker had tethered his horse. From the trail, the man had rushed madly south and west, deeper into the reservation but also in

the direction of Ples Damon and Hack Edwards.

A blue eyed Apache—Greg shook his head. That man was one of Damon's hired killers and he'd come here for a definite job—murder, evidently. Why should Damon want Ruth Cronin's death when she was cooperating with him in crowding the reservation? On the face of it, the act was foolish, but Greg had a certain amount of grudging respect for Damon's crooked plans. This near-killing had a definite bearing on events.

HE CONSIDERED his next move. He would be reported to Damon, but the bushwhacker did not know Greg's name, nor would Damon keep the man where Ruth Cronin might recognize him at any moment. There was an element of risk in it, but Greg believed that he had a good chance of continuing his masquerade as long as he did not return to the Diamond D home ranch.

But of primary importance was the dead Apache in the rocks at the foot of the cliff. The body was sure to be discovered and Apache vengeance would explode. New beef coming in only added fuel to the fire. If he could get that body to the Army post, he could hold the lid on trouble and at the same time clinch a murder charge against Damon and Edwards when the time came.

He took a bearing and headed off at a tangent to the canyon, working his way toward the Diamond D. It was rough and hard going and it was late afternoon by the time he pulled in at the foot of the cliff and tilted his head to look upward. He found the approximate spot where the body had been thrown over the rim, traced its probable trajectory down to the broken jumble of rock.

The huge, jumbled, fang-edged boulders formed a perfect hiding place. Greg dismounted and started the hard climb over and through the rocks. He had to make many detours but at last he approached the foot of the cliffs. By now he was not so sure that he could get the body out alone if he did discover it.

He halted again and once more took bearings up to the rim. He was several yards over to the right and clawed his way along the jagged surfaces. Then he stopped, looking into an empty pocket. Blood stains and a shred of cloth told him that the Indian had fallen into this pocket. But there was no body.

Greg dropped down in the pocket and hunkered down, eyes searching the ground. He found the spot where the body had sprawled and then, a scant foot away, was a perfect imprint of an Apache moccasin. He could not control his start. The Indian was dead when he sailed out over the rim and he could not possibly have left a footprint!

A soft sound caused Greg to look back and up over his shoulder, his right hand lifting to his holster. He froze. A black rifle barrel was aimed dead center on his chest and, above the weapon, a pair of beady black eyes stared coldly at him. Coarse hair framed a bronzed, flat face, thin lips that barely moved as they spoke gutturally.

"Up, *señor*."

Greg stared and the Apache's eyes narrowed as his finger tightened on the trigger. Greg stood up slowly and raised his hands above his head. Instantly four more Indians appeared miraculously on the rocks above him and then plummeted downward as though a silent signal had been given. His gun was jerked from its holster, his arms roughly yanked behind his back and thonged tightly. The four stepped back, their faces inscrutable except for the glittering, harsh impact of their eyes. The man above lowered the rifle.

"What are you doing with me?" Greg demanded.

"Hodak died," the Indian above answered evenly. "Maybe you die. The chiefs decide." "But I didn't kill—"

A stinging blow snapped across Greg's mouth, smashing his lips back against his teeth, making his head ring. The Indian stepped back and the man above spoke evenly, giving his orders.

THE Indians wasted no words. They ordered Greg to move over to the edge of the rocks with a peremptory sign. He was roughly handled, lifted and placed on his feet. A hard jab of a rifle barrel ordered him ahead.

He could do little to help himself. Time and again he was roughly lifted over the faces of the stones. Once a rock rolled under his feet and he went down. Instantly the rifle barrel jabbed cruelly into his ribs and Greg struggled to get to his feet without the help of his hands and arms. He made it, but his sides were aching.

He tried just once more to explain himself but the Apaches would not listen. More than that, they cuffed him to silence and he came out of the tangle of rocks seething inwardly, a trickle of blood running down from one corner of his mouth. At a low call from the leader, more Indians appeared, leading shaggy ponies. One of them carried a limp, bloody body across its back, lashed firmly in place. Greg's horse was brought up. An Indian untied his wrists and the leader patted the rifle barrel he held.

"Like to try run faster than bullet?"

Greg rubbed his chafed wrists and mounted silently. The cavalcade surrounded him and the leader headed off toward the east in what

Greg judged to be the general direction of the agency buildings. Greg found a grain of hope in that. There would not be immediate massacre in Jessup's presence.

Sundown caught the band a few miles out and the Apaches made preparations for camp. Nominally half-civilized and educated in the white man's school, they still clung to the ancient tribal fears of the ghosts that wandered the night. By full dark, a campfire glowed and Greg had been fed a mouthful of parched corn and some dried beef. He lay down between two of the Indians, his hands lashed and then tied securely to an Apache wrist. The least movement on his part would arouse his guard. For added precaution, one man crouched before the fire, black eyes keening the night.

By the first streak of dawn the band was up and headed steadily eastward. Close to what Greg believed was Spanish Meadow two warriors cut away from the band and were gone for several hours. They rejoined the main body just before noon several miles further on. Greg listened to their guttural report, understanding nothing. The leader grunted, turned to glare at Greg.

"More beef, *señor*. White squaw drive them."

He straightened and Greg couldn't check the coldness that touched his spine.

The broken country fell behind them and the band now rode through a series of narrow little valleys, no one of them large enough to sustain any sort of a herd. Several times Greg glimpsed shaggy ponies scrabbling for graze, once a small flock of goats watched by some silent Apache urchins and fierce looking dogs. This was the poor section of the reservation into which Ples Damon's cattle invasion had driven the Indians.

More Indians appeared on the rocks above him. . . .





The Indians changed directions, bearing northward now, and Greg knew he would not be taken to the agency. Once again broken country appeared and, at long last, the band threaded a narrow canyon and came out onto a small valley. Greg instantly saw the wickiups. Dogs barked and men stirred under the sun shelters. The villagers made a tight circle around Greg as he dismounted on orders from the leader.

He read hatred and distrust in the dark eyes that watched him. A howling sounded when Hodak's body was unleashed and dropped to the ground, a wailing that tugged at Greg's heart. The people pressed back, away from the body, and one of the old chieftains spoke angrily. Greg's captor shrugged, pointed to the body and then to Greg. Bronze faces tightened and the old chieftain spoke warningly. He turned to Greg.

"I am Timal. It is wrong the Hodak should be brought here and we leave the village now to the dead, the Apache way. But we do not go far and you will have to answer."

"I didn't kill him," Greg said. Timal made a swift gesture.

"That will be decided—later."

A man stood guard over Greg while the women hastened to move everything out of the wickiups. Boys brought in a herd of ponies and they were loaded. In half an hour the whole band filed away from the village. It had been contaminated by the presence of a dead body and probably would never be used again. Hodak's body had been placed in one of the huts and door firmly secured.

Late that night, by firelight, Greg faced Timal and the silent, aloof council of the Apaches.

Greg listened to the charges, then said, "But this is not an agency court. Why haven't I been taken there?"

Timal said, "The agency allows our lands to be taken from us. When we protect our own, we are shot like Hodak—or we are told it is white man's business. So we return to the tribal ways—and red man's business."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Redmen's Payday

GREG studied the silent, grim faces around him, wondering exactly what line of action he could take. Even if he proved he did not kill the Apache, these men would seek vengeance indiscriminately. Timal, apparently, barely held them in check now.

"Among Apaches there are good men and bad men," Greg said slowly, feeling his way. "There are good chiefs and bad chiefs. So it

is with the white men—good and bad. You know which kind killed Hodak, and you know which kind crowd the land that has been given to you."

Timal answered, "We are learning that all whites are bad men." A growl of assent went around the circle.

"Not all," Greg said hastily. "Your problems are known to many and we know the injustice that has been done. I have been sent to find out who is guilty and they will be punished by white man's law."

"You—who killed Hodak!" Timal exclaimed.

Greg asked, "Do you know the badge that marks the white man's law-keepers?" Timal nodded and Greg sat down in the dust before the surprised Apaches. He talked as he pulled off his boot and opened the inner pocket sewed into the leg. "The small law-keepers wear a silver badge, but others wear a golden one. They speak with a straight tongue and bring justice wherever they go. No one is so powerful that he can escape it. Here, see my badge."

He pulled the badge from the pocket and extended it to Timal. The chief looked at it, turned it over, his finger tracing the engraved U.S. He passed it to the next man and it went slowly around the circle. The younger men recognized it, the older ones were impressed by the initials of the government. Timal gravely passed it to Greg again.

"Had Hodak done wrong?" he asked.

"I didn't kill Hodak, but I know who did. I will bring them to justice for the murder. But I must wait until I have proof of the wrongs done to the Apache and have discovered the man who has spoken with the crooked tongue. I ask your help, Timal, and that of the tribe. I also ask for your silence."

Greg replaced the badge and pulled on his boot while the Apaches conferred in their swift gutturals. Greg stood up and waited, face and eyes calm as though he were certain of the outcome. At last a silence fell on the councilors and Timal turned to face Greg.

"We have listened and we want to believe. Tell us who killed Hodak and we will look to him for vengeance."

"No," Greg shook his head and disregarded the angry scowls that instantly appeared. "You will kill him and that is what the crooked men want you to do. Then the soldiers will come—there will be war and you will be moved from San Diman after all your young men have been killed. Trust me and I promise justice will be done."

Once again the Apaches conferred and Greg knew, from the swift, harsh rise of the voices, that there was dissension among them. He could only wait, masking his own feelings, until at last the talk died down and Timal spoke again.

"We wish to believe you and this badge that you have. But the badge could be stolen and you could speak with a lie in your throat. But we will take a chance. You can go free and we will say nothing." Timal raised his hand when Greg started to speak. "You will be watched—and we will not wait long, *señor*."

He was given a wickiup for the night and accepted it, though he would have much rather slept out under the stars rolled in his own clean blanket. His sleep was fitful. The next morning Timal, with a simple gesture toward the hills, indicated that he was free. Greg rode out of the village glad to escape with his skin.

He rode at a steady, fast pace that ate up the miles. Even so, at midday, he was still some distance from his destination and he wished he had some of the Apache dried beef or parched corn. He had eaten but sparingly that morning, suspicious of Indian cooking.

The afternoon wore on and Greg was close to where the Currycomb herd should be. He approached a thick stretch of mesquite and turned to circle it. Abruptly five men rode around the thicket directly in his path.

Hack Edwards' gun was leveled and his ugly face wore a wicked smile. Ples Damon sat thick and solid in the saddle, eyes cold and boring. A thin man with a harried face, neatly dressed in black, nervously held in his horse on Damon's left. Two punchers, unknown to Greg pressed close behind the leading trio. Damon spoke over his shoulder without turning his head.

"Bracken! Is this the hombre that stopped that little party of yours with the Cronin girl?"

One of the punchers pressed forward and Greg saw that he had blue eyes. Coarse hair and high cheekbones in a broad, flat face gave his countenance an Indian cast. Dress him in Apache garb and he'd carry the masquerade from a distance. He stared at Greg and slowly nodded.

"That's the jigger."

"Mighty active, ain't you," Damon said evenly, "for a puncher just two jumps ahead of the law?"

"Nosy, too," Hack said and he dogged back the hammer with a loud click.

Damon shook his head. "Hack, you never did have much imagination. Why kill him now and then drag him to the Currycomb herd? Shoot him and the girl at once, stampede the beef."

"And the Apaches get the tally for double murder?" Greg asked. Damon smiled a slow movement of the thick lips.

"Smart thinking, Patton. Too bad you forgot your brains when you meddled in our affairs. Bracken, get his gun. We'll show him some scenery before we cut him down."

GREG stiffened as Bracken approached, but Hack Edwards' leveled Colt prevented any fight. Bracken carefully lifted Greg's six from the holster and edged away. At a safe distance he straightened and walked boldly to Damon, handing up the Colt. Damon accepted it, stuck it in his waistband. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"We'd best get to our business. Bracken, you and Jim keep a close eye on this jigger. Anything comes up, shoot first and auger later."

His pudgy fingers tightened on the reins and he turned the horse around. Hack and the other man fell in beside him. On Bracken's curt order, Greg followed, the two punchers falling in behind. Greg rode silently, judging his chances of escape and finding them practically nil. Unarmed, closely watched, he could do nothing but wait for a break or make a last second, desperate bid for freedom and his life.

The thin man in the dark coat turned and looked closely at Greg. His eyes were deep sunken and a wisp of a mustache topped his long, bloodless lips. Greg read fear in the other's eyes before he straightened and spoke to Damon.

"Ples, I don't like this. You've taken the bit in your teeth and bolted."

"You're getting yours, Jessup, like I promised you."

"Sure—but to fake a massacre and bring the soldiers in just to get a hold of more graze—that wasn't the way we planned it. I was to get the full graze price for every head over the contract from you and the others. But—"

"I changed my mind," Damon said stolidly. "No use paying graze when I can get the land. Don't worry, I'm taking care of you, Jessup. You ain't never gonna have to worry no more. I got a right quiet place in mind where you can stay and no one'll find you."

"I'll need it if you pull this deal," Jessup grunted. "But I got to have something to live on."

"You'll have it," Damon nodded. "You've worked with me right along, and I aim to see things is right between us. Right now, we gotta figure this Currycomb layout."

Jessup subsided and the band rode on in silence. They traveled for several miles, then came out on a ridge overlooking a deep valley. Greg saw the Currycomb herd, spread out on the rich grass of the floor. A column of blue smoke marked the camp. He looked for Ruth Cronin, but the tiny figures were so far away that he could not tell which was the girl. Damon studied the valley.

"We'll head toward that camp. We'll know what to do after we get a closer look."

They moved back from the rim and took a circuitous way to a spot not far from the camp.



Bracken and the puncher held Greg while the other three scouted forward. They were gone a long time, but came back finally. Hack Edwards was grinning crookedly. Damon's cold eyes held a pleased look.

"The girl and two punchers," he announced. "Bracken, you and Jim get in your clothes. You got cover to within ten yards of the camp and you can't miss. The girl and one man the first time you fire and you'll be able to get the second man before he knows what's happening."

"What about the beef guard?"

"Two of 'em. They'll most likely come helling. Me'n Hack will plug Patton here when we hear your first shots and then stam-pede the herd. You boys show yourselves and don't kill them other two—just wing 'em. They'll figure on Apaches and by the time they drag themselves to the fort or the agency with slugs in their carcasses, they'll be so mad they'll know damn' well it was Injuns hit 'em."

"Damon, this is a risk," Jessup objected. "It's murder several times over."

"Sure it's murder," Damon shrugged callously. "But you stop worrying. There ain't a thing to bother you."

Bracken and Jim unstrapped their saddle rolls. They stripped off their clothing and Greg saw that they had already stained their skins to an Indian bronze. In a moment they wore high moccasins, breech clout and head-band. From a distance and seen through a fog of powdersmoke, they'd pass as Apaches. They lifted rifles from saddle scabbards and, with a careless wave to Damon, hurried away, disappearing into the bush.

"Watch Patton, Hack," Damon said and wheeled his horse, Jessup following him. Hack gestured Greg ahead and fell to one side and slightly behind him. Damon led the way to a point close to the Currycomb herd and Greg could see the grazing cows through a thin screen of bushes. One of the guards slouched in the saddle not twenty yards away,

rolling a cigarette. Greg felt an inner tension mount as Damon peered through the leaves at the unsuspecting man and then turned to smile at Jessup and Hack.

He placed a thick finger to his lips and then his hand smoothly lifted his Colt from the holster. Greg's knees tightened their grip on the saddle. Now was the moment for his play, though he knew that he'd never come out of this alive. Jessup reached out a long arm and checked Damon.

"No!" he said in a hoarse whisper and his forehead was beaded with sweat. His bloodless lips worked nervously and Greg knew the man's nerve was ready to crack. Damon eyed Jessup, half turning so that the Colt muzzle lifted toward Jessup. In that split second Greg read Damon's intentions in the sudden hard set of the jaw and the tight trigger finger. Boothill was to be the quiet place Damon had reserved for Jessup!

Greg sank the spurs deep and savagely wrenched on the reins. He caught Hack by surprise; the gunhawk's eyes were glued on Damon and Jessup. Greg's fist lashed out and he caught Hack squarely in the nose and mouth. The man dropped out of the saddle and Greg vaulted to the ground after him. He heard a gun explode and a man scream but had no time to look. He clawed for Hack's holster as a second shot whipped over his shoulder. Cattle bawled distantly in sudden alarm as Greg's fingers wrapped around Hack's Colt and pulled it free.

Hack twisted savagely, but Greg's grip held. He raised the Colt to rap it across the man's head and heard gunfire. Hack caught his wrist.

No bullets were coming his way. He heard a distant thunder and knew the cattle had been stampeded according to plan. By now Bracken and Jim would have cut down on the camp. Greg fought desperately to free himself, but Hack had the wiry, tricky power of a wildcat.

He looped a fist into Greg's face and his



Gothic "Gem"  
17 Jewels,  
\$39.75\*\*

**Gothic**  
JARPROOF

*the only watch whose HEART is*  
**GUARANTEED A LIFETIME**

Protected by a patented mechanism, **GOTHIC JAR-PROOF** watches "can take a licking yet keep on ticking". Precision-built, exquisitely styled. Priced from \$33.75 to \$1,200. Write for free booklet "PP".



\*Balance staff  
and its jewels

\*\*Prices  
include  
tax

Gothic "Cadet" 17 Jewels \$39.75\*\*

**GOTHIC JARPROOF WATCH CORP., NEW YORK 19, N. Y.**

knee came up in a vicious blow. He had a tight grip on Greg's gunwrist and he kept the weapon pointed away from his body. The two men strained in a tight, shuffling arc that kicked up the dust. And at any second, Greg thought, Damon would send a bullet crashing into his back—according to plan.

He caught a glimpse of a heavy figure charging through the dust, caught the dull gleam of metal as Damon's gun dropped down to line on him. His lips strained back from his teeth and he whipped around, Hack still groggily hanging on. Damon's gun exploded, winked flame and death in the dust.

Greg heard the slugs slap home in Hack Edward's body. The man gasped and went limp.

Damon saw his chance and his gun lanced flame. As Greg tripped and fell to one side, the bullet burned along his left shoulder, numbing his arm from neck to elbow. But his right hand was free and his gunsights caught Damon squarely.

He fired twice. He saw dust jump from Damon's thick chest and then a bloody hole appeared as by magic in his throat. Damon half turned, his thick legs bending, then he toppled onto his face, rolled to one side and lay still.

Greg gave only a glance at Hack, saw that he was dead. Then he raced for his horse, vaulted into the saddle and plunged the animal through the screen of bushes. He saw Jessup's dark and slender form sprawled limply on the ground and then the bushes whipped at his face as he raced through them.

A puncher was down, sitting where he had fallen, gripping a wounded shoulder. When he saw Greg erupt from the bushes, the man grabbed the Colt that lay beside him and threw a slug at the racing horseman. It went wide and Greg didn't bother to even slacken his pace. He used the spurs, heading down the valley toward the camp. The Currycomb cattle raced wildly before him, hidden by its own immense dust cloud.

Greg bore down on the camp, his eyes anxiously seeking Ruth Cronin. He saw her, rifle in her hand. She wheeled around as Greg raced up and her rifle jumped to her shoulder. Greg threw his arm up.

He forgot he still carried Hack's Colt in his hand and his move looked like a menacing gesture. The girl's rifle cracked and a giant fist slapped Greg's shoulder, sweeping him out of the saddle. He hit the ground with a bone-shaking thud and then everything went blank.

**I**T WAS night when he awakened. Firelight flickered across his eyes and then was blotted out when the girl knelt beside him. Her eyes were hard and her mouth set, though

her hands were strangely gentle as they touched his shoulder.

"You're safe!" Greg breathed. She looked strangely at him.

"Why should that please you? Your dressed-up 'Apache' tried hard enough to get me. Would have, but one of the boys spotted him first."

"My Apache?" Greg tried to sit up. Pain swept over him and he sank back, fighting to keep his senses. At last his eyes opened again. Ruth Cronin's face, above him, still looked cold and distant.

"No use lying," she said. "Jessup's alive but in a very bad way. He confessed his part in the scheme to rob the San Diman Indians, and I was fool enough to fall for it! Ples Damon and Hack Edwards are dead. What was your part in the plot?"

Greg held onto his senses and spoke weakly. "Right boot—pull it off." She stared at him and his voice grew stronger. "Do as I say! Pocket there—look in it."

She stared at him and then as gently as she could pulled off his boot and her fingers found the inner pocket. She held the badge to the firelight and then stared at him, her face white.

"I—I tried to kill you! I thought you were—"

Greg smiled weakly. "I was sent to straighten this mess up before the Indians broke loose. I tried to keep you out of it once, but you wouldn't listen. Now I'm ordering you to drift your damned beef to Currycomb range and keep it there."

Her voice was contrite as she sat beside him, her eyes were deep and soft with worry. "No need to order them off. I started them home as soon as I learned of the plan from Jessup. I've been a fool!"

Greg grinned at that. "Anybody's liable to be that, miss. I might, myself, for not taking you in, but I'll probably take a chance."

She flushed and changed the subject. "What will you do now? You're wounded and need a doctor and a nurse. How about Jessup?"

"One question at a time," Greg cut in. "With Hack and Damon dead, the case is closed. Jessup's confession ties it up and he'll go to a Federal jail for a long, long time. I need a sawbones. Take me to the Currycomb and call one."

"A nurse?" she asked. Greg paused and searched her face. His shoulder was no more than a big area of throbbing pain, but somehow he didn't mind very much. He liked the shape of her face, the soft texture of her cheeks, the touch of color as she looked away from his direct gaze. He chuckled.

"You shot me—you nurse me. Maybe the Tucson Office will give me a vacation after I recover."



# Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 25)



1. False. "Zapatos" are shoes. "Zorillas" are a type of cattle.

2. True. "Yellow bellies" are a breed of Mexican cattle having a yellowish belly.

3. According to the Western way of thinking, a "wagon herder" is a sheepherder with a wagon. Needless to mention, the term is used contemptuously by the cowpuncher.

4. "Plush couch" is the cowpuncher's slang term for his bedroll.

5. "Toothing" means looking into the mouth of a horse to try and determine how old he is.

6. True. In Western slangage "time" means "wages." Thus, in some areas of the West a cowpuncher "collects his time."

7. A "tarrabee" is a machine used for spinning.

8. A "tail rider" is a person who rides behind the herd during the cattle drive.

9. If your old-time Western friend told you he had "just sunned his moccasins," you would know he had just been thrown from a horse. Obviously, the expression originates from the idea of a person's being thrown heels over head.

10. True. A "stripper" is an individual who skins dead cattle. In the old days, the stripper used to skin dead buffalo.

11. "Step across" is an expression used in reference to a horse, and means "mount."

12. If your Western friend told you he was going to "stay out with the dry cattle," you would know he was planning a big celebration—and quite likely a wet one.

13. False. The Western slang expression "soddy" does not mean "dirty." A "soddy" is a "nester." The term probably originated because many of the early nesters lived in sod houses.

14. False. "Snubbed stock" are livestock animals which have been dehorned—not cattle which have been left unfed during the winter months.

15. True. A "shirttail outfit" is a small outfit which is operating on a shoestring and which employs few hands—perhaps as few as one or two.

16. In rangeland slangage, "sheepdipper" is an old-time term used by rustlers in reference to honest cowpunchers.

17. When a cowpuncher "sage hens" it means he is spending the night on a desert without bedroll.

18. "Saddled a dead horse to him" means to saddle a person with a large and unpleasant obligation.

19. True. "Pony beeves" are young cattle ready for market.

20. One would be most likely to hear the term "pitching" substituted for "bucking" in Texas.

# GUN CRAZY

*They weren't particular at Rock Springs.  
They'd take Johnny King—dead or alive!*

---



**J**OHNNY KING had the fateful piece of paper shoved carelessly in his shirt pocket when he entered the Eagle Saloon. A dozen pair of eyes swiveled around at him as he entered, and every eye centered on that piece of paper.

"By golly!" Pop Withers breathed into his beer, "the durn fool done it!"

"Looks that way, don't it?" Cy Hatfield, the bartender whispered back. "Shame, ain't it? Figgered Johnny'd be around these parts a long time too."

Johnny King leaned both elbows on Cy's bar and stared unseeingly into the mirror back of the bar. The mirror offered him back the vision of himself; a shock of red hair, a nose that hadn't straightened out after that

second time it was busted, and a wide mouth that liked to grin. But he didn't see his own reflection—he saw a memory, a recent one, of the girl over in the land office. His chest heaved and he sighed deeply.

"Acts like he's sorry hisself he done it," Cy muttered to Pop.

Cy moved down the bar, wiping with his towel as he went. He stopped in front of Johnny and looked squarely into Johnny's eyes. He had the feeling that Johnny was looking right through him.



The startled cattle bawled loudly for a moment, then broke into a dead run.

By  
**JAMES  
SHAFFER**



"What'll it be, Johnny?"  
"Root beer," Johnny said in a queer voice. Cy almost strangled. Then he said heartily, "Root beer it is, Johnny." He drew a mug full and slid it across the mahogany. Johnny picked up the mug and sipped it with enjoyment.

The squeak of the batwing doors of the

saloon made every man in the place—except Johnny—jump. But it was only Sheriff Brodney. The sheriff fixed his eye on Johnny and stalked over.

"So you done it," he said accusingly.

"Shore did," Johnny mused. "Asked her to go to the dance with me next Saturday night, too. She said all right, she would."

The lawman's jaw set. "I don't mean that, you fool!" he snorted. "I mean you went and homesteaded Slade Buckner's Rock Springs range."

The dreamy look went out of Johnny's eyes, and their gray softness turned hard, and then smoky with anger. He showed the hot stirring of rage in him as he whirled on the sheriff.

He snapped, "Johnny King's springs, sher-

iff. Those springs were open to homestead—and I've homesteaded 'em."

"Johnny, you come here a year ago." The lawman's voice was almost gentle. "I like you. Everybody likes you. But you're acting like a fool to try and take anything away from Slade Buckner. And you're building trouble for everybody."

"I ain't taking nothing away from Buckner," Johnny said. "I'm accepting a homestead from the U.S. Government. I aim to have me a home, a place fit to take a wife to—maybe raise some kids."

"Damn," the sheriff said half-heartedly, "I believe the only reason you took out that homestead, was just an excuse to drop in and see Beth Adams."

Beth Adams was the girl in the land office. She had deep blue eyes, a halo of coppery hair, a freckled nose and red lips, and the whole range knew she had Johnny. Since the death of her father, Beth had been forced to earn her living.

It took a moment for the sheriff's remark to sink into Johnny's mind, but when it did, it brought an angry flush to his cheeks.

"That's a lie," he rapped out. "I homesteaded the springs because that land is the best around here. I aim to have me a little combination ranch-farm, and the Rock Springs land is open to homesteaders!"

The sheriff turned and waggled a weary finger at Cy. The bartender poured a double bourbon and shoved it across the bar. But as Sheriff Brodney raised it to his lips, the batwing doors once more flapped open and this time—oddly enough—nobody jumped. The sheriff had named the trouble and it was here.

**S**LADE BUCKNER wore California pants, tucked into hand-stitched boots, and the rest of his clothes matched. His face could have been handsome, except for the arrogant scowl he habitually wore. He chewed on a thin black stogie as he stalked through the Eagle toward Johnny.

Backing Slade up were three men—big Keg Dunlop, foreman of the Circle B, bought the biggest size clothes he could find, and he still seemed to bulge in them. His black eyes were narrow-set, over a hawk like nose. His lips were full and twisted in a truculent sneer.

Hamp Peters was long and rangy, with almost colorless eyes, and a nervous habit of casting glances over his shoulder, as if there were something on his back trail that worried him. Bo Snyder looked deceptively small and lazy, and had a way of looking at a man through eyes that looked sleepy—but more than one man, seeing those eyes, had wished himself elsewhere.

There was no preamble, no unnecessary exchange of greetings. Slade Buckner stalked

across the Eagle and drew up facing Johnny.

"All right, King," Buckner's voice was low, and edged with danger, "so you carried out your threat to homestead Rock Springs. I didn't think you had the damn nerve—" he shrugged—"but since you did, I'll pay. Providing, of course," he added, "the price is reasonable." How much will it cost me to buy you out?"

A sigh went up in the Eagle. Sheriff Brodney finished his interrupted drink, and Cy, the bartender, in a sudden mood of good fellowship, set up drinks on the house. All eyes turned expectantly on Johnny, and he felt the impact of their stares. He knew what they were expecting, and he was damned if he was going to do it.

"I didn't buy to hold you up, Buckner. You know that. I don't aim to sell."

Keg Dunlop exploded a curse and lunged past his boss. His big fist whistled through the air. Johnny saw it coming and ducked. He slammed a hard right into Keg's four-day-old beard. Keg grunted, shook his head and lunged in again.

Sheriff Brodney's voice rapped through the hubbub. Keg Dunlop paid no heed at all and the grizzled lawman lifted a six-shooter from his holster and slammed the barrel down on Keg's head.

It was only a glancing blow, but it staggered the big foreman for a moment and, during that moment, Sheriff Brodney brought the fight to an end.

"I'm leg-shooting the first man that swings another fist," he barked. "Buckner, call your dogs off—if you don't want 'em laid up in jail for a spell. Johnny—back clear of them hombres!"

Slade Buckner's face was red and twisted with rage. He bit through the cigar in his mouth and angrily spat out the pieces.

"That's all—for now, Keg," he ordered, then whirled to Brodney. "You old fool! Do you actually think you can stop this? You think you're going to protect that damn squatter that's moved in on my water? You think I'm going to let him do that?"

Johnny cut in quickly, "I've asked no help from the law, Buckner. You've used that free range long enough—you had your chance to buy it, or homestead it, like me. But you didn't figure anybody would buck you. Well, I'm bucking you—all the way."

Slade Buckner's soft, uncalledous hand hovered near the ivory butt of his six-gun, his eyes glittering like a coiled rattler's. Then he got a grip on his anger. The tension eased out of his body. He turned.

"Let's go, boys." At the door he paused and looked back at Sheriff Brodney. "Make sure you're backing the right side in this, lawdog," he said contemptuously.



Dead silence reigned in the Eagle until the sound of Circle B horses died away at the edge of town. Then Sheriff Brodney turned to Johnny.

"See what you've started?" he asked bitterly.

Johnny retorted angrily, "You worried about yourself or me?"

Sheriff Brodney scrubbed his chin reflectively. "Buckner pulls a wide loop in politics," he admitted, "but I'll rod the law around here as I see fit. But you ain't got a chance. And it won't only be Buckner. Other ranchers around here don't like this homestead law. They don't like Buckner, but they'll side him in this fight."

Johnny sighed. It was an old argument; one that had been going on since the homestead law was passed. Whether a rancher should buy his land or lease it from the government, or try to use his guns to hold on to it. The sheriff knew the argument as well as Johnny did, so there was no use going over it all again.

"Somebody's gonna start homesteading in this part of the country," Johnny said. "It might as well be me."

No one had an argument to that, so Johnny stalked out of the Eagle.

**H**E WAS stepping into the stirrup, when a quick flurry of footsteps halted him.

He turned, grinning weakly, going inwardly limp, as he always did at the sight of Beth Adams.

"Johnny, I'm not going to let you do it!"

"You already did," he pointed out.

"Give me back that homestead deed," Beth said, and he noticed the shadowy film of fear in her eyes. "I saw Buckner and his men go in the Eagle—and I listened outside. Johnny, you can't do it!"

"I've done it," Johnny said stubbornly.

"I'm—I'll tear up the records," she said.

"I'll rip out the page that shows you homesteaded the springs!"

"You do—and I'll write to Washington." Johnny stepped into the saddle. He was halfway home before he realized the significance of her words.

"Golly!" he said aloud, awed by the thought. "She was worried about—me!" He almost turned back. And if his horse hadn't known the way home, Johnny wouldn't have gotten there.

He managed to get things going, though. Now that his homestead was officially recorded, he moved his camp to the spot he'd picked for his house and went to work.

By the second day, he'd felled enough trees to start building the cabin. He'd thought first of building a sod shanty. But he wanted something better than a sod shanty to offer Beth

when he popped the question, and he figured there was no time like the present to build his cabin. So a cabin it was.

Sheriff Brodney rode out the third day, looking nervous and worried.

"Seen anything of Buckner?"

"Not a hair," Johnny told him. "What you worrying about, sheriff? Buckner knows I got the law on my side."

"Buckner ain't a man to be stopped by knowin' that," Brodney grunted. "Keep your eyes open and be careful." He fumbled with a package tied on the back of his saddle. "Beth sent this."

Johnny opened the package—biscuits. They were cold, but they tasted like food for the gods to Johnny. He watched the sheriff ride away, then spread out the biscuits and made a meal. He was feeling again as he had on that homeward ride when a sound jerked him around.

Johnny swore as he got to his feet. Hamp Peters and Bo Snyder were closing in from the other sides. Keg Dunlop already had his gun trained on Johnny's middle. He came up, reached out and flipped Johnny's own gun into the dust.

"Now!" Keg grunted in fierce elation. He tossed his own gun aside and closed in. Johnny jerked to one side and smashed a fist into Keg's face. The foreman grinned as if enjoying some huge joke and rushed in again, and Johnny knew he was in for the beating of his life. Maybe, he thought grimly, a beating that could cost him his life.

He sidestepped Keg's rush and slammed a blow into Keg's stomach. The big foreman grunted; then his grin was back, bigger than ever.

"Keep hopping around, squatter. It ain't going to do you no good."

He lunged forward, big fist swinging. Johnny got his feet tangled. He heard Hamp chuckle gleefully as Keg's fist connected hard on the side of Johnny's head. His world spun in a red haze of pain, and the next thing he knew he was spitting out dust.

"Kick his ribs through his guts, Keg!" Bo Snyder yelled. Johnny heard Keg's boot thump as the big foreman took off. Dizzy with pain, he flung himself over in an awkward roll. Keg's boot whistled through the air, but his spur raked a gash in Johnny's scalp.

Johnny got his wavering knees under him and pushed erect. Keg rushed him again. Johnny plunged sideways, but Bo Snyder caught him. He was trying to jerk free when Keg's fist landed again. He stumbled and sprawled face down on some of the logs he'd brought up for the cabin. Keg's boot heel nearly tore Johnny's ear off.

Somehow he got to his feet. Keg's huge frame seemed to waver and wriggle before his

eyes like smoke from a campfire. He saw Keg coming at him again, and tried to swing at him, but his arms seemed paralyzed and wouldn't obey his command.

Keg's blow that time was merely a dull shock to Johnny, and he found himself face down again on the ground, and his battered face was pressing against something cool. He stared at it, trying to focus his eyes. Keg's boot landed again, and the object swam dizzily for a moment.

Then he recognized it. His gun. Keg had knocked him sprawling right down on his gun. His fingers ached as he twined them around the butt and he rolled over. Faintly, he heard Hamp's yell of warning; saw Keg's boot swinging toward the gun as he pulled the trigger. Keg's boot landed first; the slug whined harmlessly into the air.

Keg panted, "Haul him to his feet."

Johnny felt himself being lifted up. He felt someone holding him erect, and then he saw Keg coming at him, fists swinging. But Johnny only felt the first blow—after that he sank into a dark pit and knew no more.

SOMETHING cool was trickling over his face when he fought back to the world of the living. That cool stuff felt wonderful; his face and body were on fire with pain.

"Can you see, Johnny?" It was Sheriff Brodney's voice.

Johnny's eyes were shut. He tried to open them. The left one would open a trifle—enough to give him a blurred image of the lawman. He ran a hand over his face. He couldn't tell where his lips ended and his nose began. Both eyes were puffed up—his right one completely shut.

"I heard a shot and rode back," the lawman said. "So they got you after all, huh?"

"Wasn't watching my back," Johnny admitted through his puffy lips. "It won't happen again."

Johnny pushed himself to a sitting position. He felt over his bruises. Brodney informed him dryly that he had no broken bones.

The sheriff said, "Givin' up this fool idea? If you hadn't been so bull headed about it—you wouldn't have got this beating."

Johnny muttered, "Them dirty sons won't sneak up on me any more."

Sheriff Brodney stared at him a long moment. Finally, he said softly, "Hell, I'd like to protect you, but I ain't but one man. I can't be every place at the same time."

"I took on this fight," Johnny said. "I'll fight 'er myself."

Sheriff Brodney rolled a smoke with gnarled, patient fingers. When he got it going he spent a minute swearing in a low, steady rumble. Johnny tried to grin, though the effort hurt.

"When you git through," he told Brodney, "help me saddle my horse and load my camp stuff on my pack mule. I'm taking to the mountains till I'm better."

"You'd ought to see a doctor," Sheriff Brodney argued, but Johnny shook his head.

"Got some salve in my outfit," he said. "Says on the label it's good for man or beast. Dunno which one I am right now, but I'm one or the other."

The sheriff helped him into the saddle, and Johnny rode away.

He clutched the saddlehorn against the dizzy spells that swept over him and rode into the mountains. The first two days and nights were pure hell. It was all he could do to hobble the horses and drag one blanket from his camp outfit. He didn't even try to remove his clothes, just rolled up in the blanket and slept.

By the third day he began to limber up some. The fourth day he shot two rabbits and gorged himself on fresh meat. The next day he pushed farther back in the mountains and got a deer. He camped by a small lake, cleaned and dressed the deer, then set about the serious job of recuperating.

He swam in the lake, hiked and ran up and down the steep mountain trails, and he smeared on the salve lavishly. Meanwhile, a plan was slowly forming in his mind. A plan that dealt with Slade Buckner.

It was strange, but he held no particular grudge against Keg Dunlop or his two sidekicks for the beating they'd given him. It was as if they didn't exist at all. The man responsible for that beating was Slade Buckner. He thought he owed Buckner for it.

The days dragged by and the marks of the beating slowly disappeared from Johnny's body. Then came the morning he saddled his horse, packed his outfit and started back for Pine City. He stopped and left his outfit at his homestead. The logs he'd cut for his cabin were now a pile of ashes. The sight of them, however, didn't worry him half as much as he'd expected.

The next day was Saturday, and he had figured that would be the best day for what he had planned, so he camped for the night at the springs. Before daybreak the next morning, he was in the saddle, riding straight toward Circle B headquarters.

DAWN was streaking the sky as he approached within a mile of Buckner's big ranch house. There, in a lush meadow, he found what he wanted. A fair sized herd of cattle, bedded down for the night.

Johnny took his hat off and waved it. He yelled, then ripped his gun out and flung shots into the sky. The startled cattle got to their feet. They bawled loudly for a moment, then broke into a dead run. Johnny whooped after



them for a little ways, until he was sure they were thoroughly spooked and would run for quite a while. Then he cut his mount away from the herd and headed for Rock Springs Creek.

He walked his horse a good mile up the creek to blot his trail, stopping every now and then to listen. Finally he heard what he wanted; a band of hard riding horsemen galloping after the herd. Johnny left the Creek and headed for town.

It was still early when he arrived and he was able to leave his horse down behind the livery stable and climb to the roof of the school house without being observed. The school house had a bell tower, and Johnny sat in the shade of that, watching the main street of Pine City.

It was almost ten o'clock when his vigil was rewarded. A big black horse cantered into town and its rider pulled up in front of the Eagle saloon. There was no mistaking the horse or its rider. And Slade Buckner was alone.

Johnny watched Buckner leg it to the sheriff's office. Johnny slid down to the edge of the roof. He hung straight down for a moment, from the drain pipe, then dropped to the ground.

Three minutes later, he quietly opened the back door of the Eagle saloon. The place was pretty well filled with customers and a steady hubbub of voices reached his ears. He stepped inside and ran his eye quickly over the patrons at the bar. Slade Buckner wasn't among them. Johnny started swiftly toward the front door.

The hubbub of talk died instantly. Men halted their beer mugs halfway to their lips, staring at him in surprise.

The barkeep said, "What you doing here, Johnny—heard you'd left the country."

"Somebody else figured I'd left the country."

Johnny, mirthless, took his stand beside the batwing doors, and waited. A man muttered something and started to move toward the door. Johnny stepped casually in front of him and his hand dropped to his gunbutt.

"Going somewheres, Lyle?"

"Uh—got a little shopping to do," the man grunted.

"It'll wait," Johnny grinned. "Hey, Cy! Give Lyle a drink on me. In fact, set up the house on me. Drink hearty, boys and take 'er easy. Ain't nobody leaving the Eagle right now."

The man named Lyle looked at Johnny nervously for a moment, then shrugged and drifted back to the bar. No one else tried to walk out. On the contrary Johnny heard a couple of men mutter that wild horses couldn't drag them out of the place.

The talk started up again, but in a subdued

tone, and then suddenly it stopped. Heavy purposeful footsteps were moving along the plank sidewalk outside. The door opened.

Some instinct told Buckner that something was wrong. He got halfway through the doors, then stopped. His hand swiveled quickly and he saw Johnny.

"King!" the word was like a curse. His hand shot downward, but Johnny's gun was already in his hand.

"I'll take yours, Buckner," Johnny said grimly. He flicked it out and tossed it to the bartender.

"What the hell you trying to do, King?" There was a hoarse rasp in Buckner's voice, a quivering that no one in Pine City had ever heard before.

"I owe you a beating, Buckner," Johnny said grimly. "What I ought to do is tie you up and stomp—that would be the same as Hamp and Bo holding me while Keg hit me—but I'm giving you a fair shake. Put 'em up, Buckner. Your fur's getting ready to fly!"

He raised his hand and brought it down sharply across Buckner's face. Slade Buckner's face went crimson.

His first blow caught Johnny just under his ear and sent him spinning into a card table. Johnny brought up, surprised, then fought back.

Buckner's licks were solid and stinging. Johnny gave ground until he steadied.

Then the memory of Keg's big fists hammering at him, while his own arms were pinned helplessly at his sides, began to percolate in his mind. His rage began to mount. He stopped retreating, ripped hard rights to Buckner's face. He got one in down below, and the rancher gasped and doubled up. Johnny straightened him with a whistling uppercut to the jaw. Buckner sagged.

Johnny jerked him to his feet and felt the man's nose crunch under his knuckles, and blood spurted down Buckner's fancy shirt. Buckner went down to his knees and refused to get up.

"Stay down there an' I'll kick your guts out," Johnny panted.

Buckner looked up at him. The blood ran out of his nose and dripped off the point of his chin. He opened his bloody lips to say something, then changed his mind. Johnny turned on wobbly legs to the bar. There were some things he couldn't do.

Then for the first time, he saw Sheriff Brodney. The lawman stood just inside the door, his face bleak and hard. Sheriff Brodney held a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, and its black muzzle was covering Slade Buckner's crew!

"All right, Keg," Brodney said quietly, "pick your boss up and take him home."

Keg Dunlop didn't say anything. He

motioned to Hamp and Bo and they helped Buckner to his feet. Buckner could only see out of one eye, but that eye glared at Johnny with a fierce hate.

"I'm gutshooting the first of your men that reaches for his gun, Buckner," the lawman said.

"That's okay, sheriff," Buckner mumbled, then swung his good eye toward Johnny. "So I'm going to have to go the whole way with you, am I?"

"I don't stand for murder," Sheriff Brodney said sharply, "and that sounded like a threat to me, Buckner!"

Johnny motioned to Cy. The bartender stared for a moment, then nodded and handed over the guns. Johnny shouldered his way over to Buckner, holding the man's gun out to him.

"Any time you want to make it with guns, I won't be hard to find," he rasped. "Just make sure it's you."

Buckner laughed, a short raspy sound. "I wouldn't waste my time gun-fighting with you, King."

"I'm warning you, Buckner," Sheriff Brodney cut in. "I won't stand for murder. If Johnny King is found along the trail with a bullet in the back I'm coming for you."

"Don't worry," Buckner said quietly. "King won't be found with a bullet in his back. I promise you that. Let's go, boys."

JOHNNY shoved his gun thoughtfully back into its holster and walked out. He grinned as Beth rushed up and grabbed his arm.

"Sorry I missed that dance a while back. Maybe we can go to the next one."

It was a funny thing, he thought. Beth could have talked him into or out of anything—except his feud with Buckner. He grinned at her fears, liking them—and thought obliquely that there might lie a part of his reasons for fighting Buckner.

Four days dragged themselves slowly by, then four more, while he worked peacefully on his cabin. On the ninth day, Sheriff Brodney rode out. His face was lined and worried.

"Johnny, you stay out of town for a couple of weeks," the lawman said.

"Why?"

The lawman said, "You know how Pine City is. Strangers drift in and drift out all the time. Some of them hang around town for a while before they move on."

"And one of them has stopped over and is hanging around town, is that it?" Johnny asked.

"Not one—three," Brodney countered. "Three strangers, Johnny. All gun hung and close mouthed. All taking it easy around town and minding their own business. None of

them have done a thing that I could chase 'em out for."

"And you think one of them is a gunnie Buckner has sent for?"

The actual words were something of a shock to him, though the thought had been in his mind since the moment Buckner had left the Eagle saloon. Buckner would bring in a professional gunman to do the job—it was, from his point, a practical solution. A stranger would drift around town, minding his own business, until he got a chance to pick a quarrel with Johnny.

"Sure one of them is here to kill you, Johnny," Brodney said. "I don't know which one. Keg Dunlop rode back to town that Saturday you whupped Buckner. He mailed a letter at the post office. It was addressed to Cheyenne Smith."

A cold trickle moved up Johnny's spine. Cheyenne Smith was a cold blooded killer for pay.

"Can't tell which one is Cheyenne, sheriff?"

Brodney shook his head. "This Smith gent dresses like any other forty a month cowhand. Looks like any other drifter, too, from what I've heard. Never saw a picture of him. Any of these three could be him."

"Only way to find out then, is insult all three of 'em, huh?"

"You stay out of town for a couple of weeks," Brodney said sharply. "I'll find out which is which and give him his walking papers."

Johnny shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good to run this Smith out of town, sheriff. There'd be others. Maybe somebody else'd get killed, crossin' one of them. This is still my fight."

"Johnny, you're a blame' fool—Buckner has showed his stripe. The town is against him. You let well enough alone, and Pine City will run him out, sooner or later. The town's against him now."

Johnny continued to shake his head. "The town's been against him all along, but Buckner don't give a hoot." He thought a while. Then he said, half to himself, "I wonder if this Cheyenne's ever been in a fight where the other fellow was out to kill him—even if that other fellow died doing it?"

"Huh?" Brodney asked sharply.

"Let's go to town," Johnny grinned.

CY HATFIELD moved down the bar as Johnny and the sheriff entered the Eagle saloon. Cy slapped his bar rag down and swabbed industriously.

"Ain't nobody in this town'll say a word if you ride out of here and stay out of town for a while," he said flatly. "Long enough for the sheriff to pick out this Cheyenne Smith and git him out of town."



"I like the town—when I like it."

"It don't do no good to talk to him," Sheriff Brodney sighed. "I done tried."

Cy looked uncomfortable. "There's plenty in town that'll side you, Johnny."

"The showdown," Johnny said quietly, "is between me and Buckner. Lemme talk to you a minute, Cy."

"Oh, lordy!" Brodney groaned. "He still thinks he's fighting Buckner."

Johnny took Cy aside, then came back to the bar. A man pushed through the batwings and slouched to the bar. Cy Hatfield looked at the newcomer nervously. The man ordered whiskey and downed it neat. He wore a gun. It was tied to his thigh, but the thongs to tie it down dangled from the holster. He paid no attention to Johnny.

Pine City citizens began drifting in, silent and morose, watching Johnny. After a while a second stranger strolled in. He looked like an ordinary cowhand, except, Johnny noted, that his eyes were quick and shifty. He felt a tingle along his spine as the stranger strolled down the bar. A sigh went up as the man stopped by Johnny.

"Howdy cowboy," the man said pleasantly. "I been beating everybody in this town shooting pool, but this is the first time I've seen you. Want to take me on for a few games?"

"Why not?"

The stranger smiled and followed Johnny to the back of the Eagle to the single pool table there. Johnny started to reach for the cue, and the stranger's hand shot out and closed over the same stick Johnny reached for. A hard knot formed in Johnny's stomach.

The stranger clipped a curse and Johnny said with studied slowness, "That's a fighting word—here in Pine City."

A harsh whisper of a laugh cracked through the man's thin lips. Johnny studied the man closely. Those eyes. They weren't nervous now. They were like needles, boring into his own. The mouth was a hard, cruel trap.

"So it's a fight you want?" Smith's voice was lifting now, carrying to every corner of the Eagle. "Well, you can have it—any time you want."

Johnny called back to the bar, "That blacksmith bring back my gun yet, Cy?"

"Sure," Cy called back. "I got 'er right here."

Cheyenne Smith laughed brittlely. Johnny said, "Might as well have a drink first. Cy, give me and my new friend a drink—the best in the house!"

Cheyenne Smith swiveled his head around quickly, eyes staring mouth gaping.

"What the hell is all this—" he started to snarl. He stopped, staring. Cy had put a shotgun on the bar. Beside it he put two drinks.

Johnny walked to it, picked it up affectionately. "Figgered I might have some trouble, so I had hair-triggers put on Betsy. The way I see it, Smith, you're faster'n me, but I'm bound to get you with this. Just droppin' it will set off both barrels—an bein' close like this, I can't miss. We'll have a drink an' go outside. I'll give you a chance to draw—or ride out."

Cheyenne Smith blanched under his tan. His eyes were nervous and shifty again, Johnny noted, and there was a twitch at the corner of his mouth. His hand jerked a little and his fingers were flexing rapidly.

"I figure," Johnny went on conversationally, "that you'll git me the first shot. So do you. But as long's I can't miss, either, it's a fair fight."

"Damn you—" the words choked out of Smith's throat like a saw hitting a pine knot. The sweat was breaking out in the palms of Johnny's hands now—he cradled the shotgun loosely. Smith's draw might beat his getting the gun into position.

Smith was quivering with rage, and he was dropping into the crouch again. Johnny knew he was pushing the man to the breaking point. The men behind both of them had cleared out of line.

"You got the guts to fight a man fair, ain'tcha?" Johnny asked.

"You damn crazy fool!" Smith exploded. He whirled and slammed through the batwing doors into the street. The patrons of the Eagle broke into a noisy babble of voices. Johnny paid no attention. His knees were suddenly so weak he had to grab the bar to hold on. He picked up his drink but his throat was constricted so tight he couldn't drink it.

After a moment he downed the drink, then walked unsteadily toward the front door, unmindful of the men calling to him. Sheriff Brodney hurried after him. Cy Hatfield hopped over the bar and came running. Johnny pushed through the doors and out onto the sidewalk.

Cheyenne Smith was walking across the street, toward the hotel. His steps were short and jerky. Over on the hotel porch, Slade Buckner and his three shadows watched him come. There was a grin on Buckner's face. Keg Dunlop was looking at Johnny, amusement written on his coarse features.

"Ain'tcha gonna draw, Cheyenne?" Johnny called pleasantly. "Might's well get it over with. I'd hate to be luggin' this gun much longer—fact is, I might drop it now."

Cheyenne Smith abruptly changed his course. He'd been walking toward the hotel. Now he was walking straight toward a hipshot bay mare. He jammed a foot in the stirrup and climbed into the saddle.

*(Continued on page 130)*

*For a gent who had only known peace at the flaming end of a six-gun, Buck Reynolds had a strange ambition. He wanted to grow flowers—on a worse man's coffin!*



"I hope you got some good rope handy," Buck said conversationally. "So I won't have to shoot you. . . ."

---

## BY THE

### CHAPTER ONE

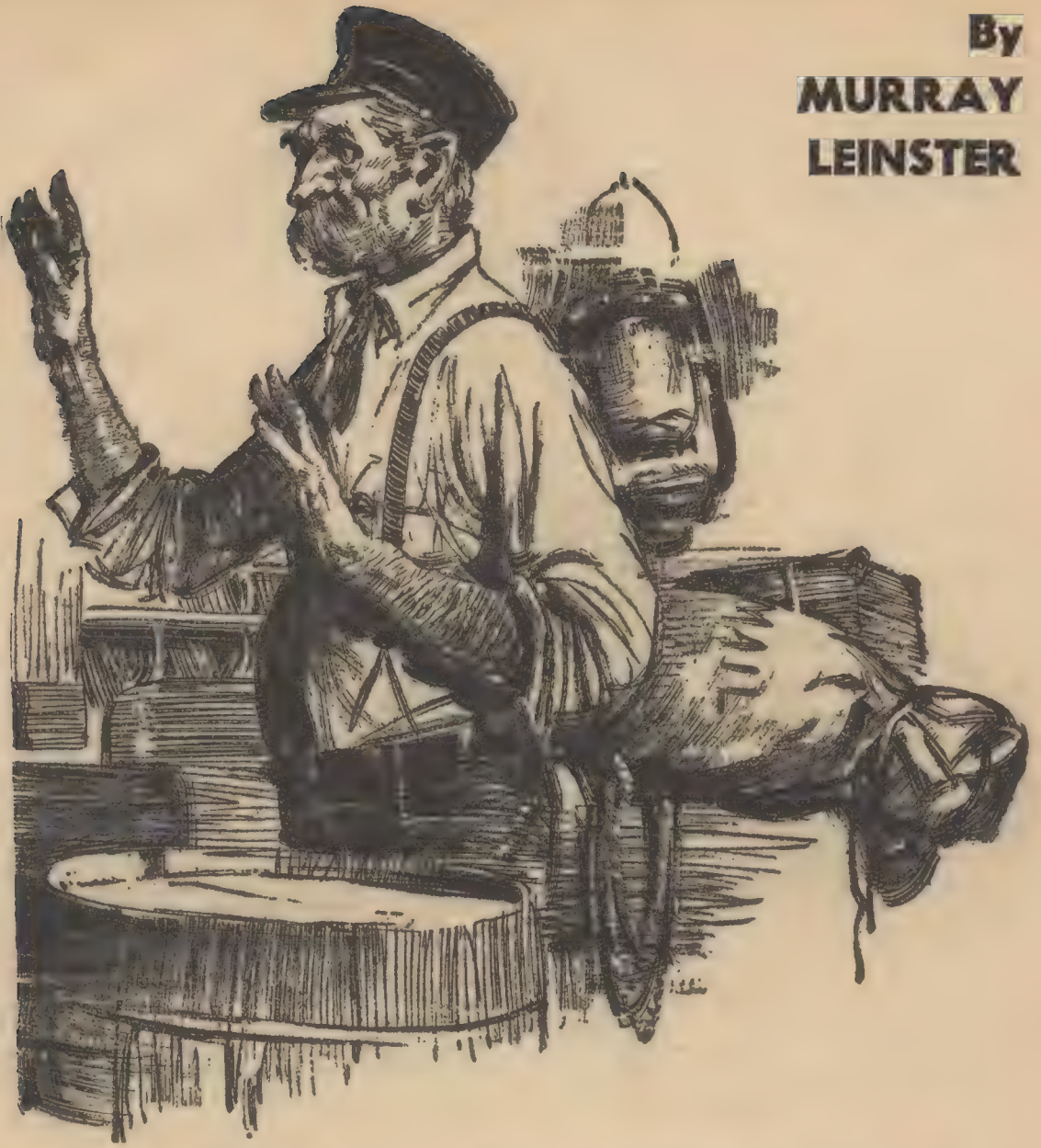
#### Long Trail Prodigal

**W**HEN BUCK REYNOLDS got off the railroad train at Animas he was fresh from the penitentiary. He was still a small bow-legged man with wispy, sandy hair and an expression of truculent stubbornness. He limped a little from an old bullet wound.

As the locomotive with its bell-shaped smokestack went puffing out of Animas, he glared defiantly about the station platform. Nobody noticed him. Time was, of course, when plenty would have recognized him, but now nobody thought to look at him twice. The town went placidly about its business. It



By  
**MURRAY  
LEINSTER**



# GUNS FORGOT

hadn't changed much. There was the old familiar smell of horses at the hitching racks, cattle in the shipping pens, and alkali dust everywhere. Buck went stamping off in search of somebody who might still be his friend.

He had two errands to attend to before his plans for the future could be realized. The first errand would be to see Joe Davis' widow. That was going to be tough. Selma Davis had never willingly been the wife of an outlaw.

She'd stuck to him, but she'd spoken her mind about his goings-on, and she'd never had any use whatever for Buck. But he wasn't going to her for approval—she simply had his few legitimate possessions in her care, and she would turn them over to him. Almost certainly, though, with a pungent lecture on his misdoings in the past and his probable future. And Buck was going to have to take it.

The second errand would be to locate the

Deacon. He had to see Joe's widow first, because she had his guns. But after he'd bowed under her wrath and gotten them, he meant to strap on those old, well-supplied hoglegs and hunt up the Deacon. It was not only that the Deacon had shot him from behind and so caused him to fall into the hands of the law. Buck would always believe that he'd killed Joe at the same time. He could never hope to prove it, but he'd always believe it. And he meant to discuss that old treachery with the Deacon, letting his six-guns do the talking.

After that he proposed to settle down peacefully in the hideout he and Joe had found up in the Abogados hills, and let the world find its way to wherever it was going without him. He was of an age, now, when peace appealed to him. More, up in the penitentiary he'd become a gardener, and he envisioned a ten-acre paradise where he and Joe Davis had hidden rustled stock and stolen horses of yore. It would blossom like the rose for the satisfaction of his declining years. But naturally he intended to take care of the Deacon first.

**P**ERHAPS, he reflected hopefully, the Deacon still make use of the hideout, and would be found there. In such a case, the Deacon would become the occupant of a private, well-gardened cemetery, and of evenings Buck could smoke his pipe in happy contemplation of the Deacon's headstone. He would carve it lovingly, with a strictly accurate description of the Deacon's antecedents, character, and undoubted home in the hereafter.

He had planned a contented old age for himself, but first he had to see Selma Davis and get his guns.

He stamped truculently down the main street of Animas, passed the Buzzard's Roost Saloon, and sternly repressed his thirst. He passed a general store that he and Joe had held up, once, when retribution was close on their trail and they had to have supplies for a six-months' hole-up. He passed a saloon that he, alone, had shot up extensively in celebration of some event that now had slipped his mind. He remembered that the proprietor of the saloon had dived out a back window, borrowed a shotgun and buckshot shells, and come back with aides, and that he would have been shot up as thoroughly as the saloon, but for Joe's timely assistance. He remembered. . .

His progress down the dusty, sun-baked street was a parade of triumphant memories. But he was merely a runty, dried-up little man with a limp, just out of the state penitentiary after serving his term. He had no regrets, though, save that his partner Joe was no longer on top of the ground. Joe'd been a partner! There weren't such partners nowadays. Buck sniffed scornfully at the sight of two young cowpunchers grinning at each other

as they shook hands, obviously after not having seen each other for a long time.

He went up the street, and saw no single familiar face. He trudged back down the street again, and saw none but strangers. There were resemblances to be noted, to be sure. There was a right pretty girl riding a Circle Bar horse, and on examination Buck became convinced that she was Sally Henderson.

She had been a skinny, freckled kid of thirteen when she'd found him trying to run off a small clump of her father's cattle, and had tried—weeping with fury—to destroy him utterly with a twenty-gauge shotgun, fired over her saddle, from two hundred yards. Buck vexedly conceded that he'd been away for a long time.

He saw Hung Lo, who ran a restaurant, and was shocked at the formerly lean Celestial's elderly fatness. And there was an old man—a deplorably old man—smoking on the porch of the Commercial House, and Buck stared at him half a dozen times before he was willing to admit that it was no other than the former sheriff who'd sent him off to prison. But he felt no animus. Any revenge he might have wished to take had been already taken by time. Still, he felt a certain uneasiness that something might have changed in him, too.

Then he saw Miguel Gutierrez and was cheered. Miguel was fatter and his moustache was more luxuriant, but in other essentials he was unchanged. In times past he had served enthusiastically as watchdog and informer for Buck and his partner in their careers. He'd passed on word when the sheriff was out of town, when a payroll was apt to be due, and when the local citizens were losing patience and talking about organizing a posse to hunt down the two local outlaws, with time and money no object.

Miguel dozed in the sun. Buck Reynolds stalked up to him and regarded him truculently. His shadow fell upon Miguel.

Miguel opened his eyes and blinked, and said plaintively, "*Perdoname, señor, pero el sol—*" Then his mouth dropped open. "*Dios mio! Señor R-r-reynolds! Dios mio!*"

"Yeah," said Buck. "How about gettin' a jug o' vino an' settlin' down somewheres to tell me what's happened while I been gone?"

Miguel beamed. Then he spread out his hands expressively. Buck scowled, but produced money. Miguel took it and shuffled away at what was for him practically breakneck speed. He came back five minutes later with a huge bottle of home-made sour wine.

"Eef you honor my humble 'ome, señor," he suggested, "we weel talk."

His home was reached through an alley between two saloons. It was the same tumble-down shack. His wife, also, was fatter, but the



number of children had—this was truly remarkable—decreased.

"*Mi niños*," explained Miguel, "they grow up, they marry, they go away. Now I 'ave only seven!"

"Yeah," said Buck. "What's happened while I've been gone?"

Miguel filled two glasses. Holding one in his hand, he began a recital of events. So-and-so was dead. So-and-so had been shot. So-and-so had left town. The Buzzard's Roost had changed hands. The new proprietor of the Sidewinder was reported to cut his whiskey. The Elite Place Dance-hall—

"What's happened to the Deacon?" demanded Buck.

Miguel beamed.

"Ah, the Señor Deacon!" he said happily. "He ees smart man! You remember w'en he rode weeth you and the Señor Joe? *Seturo!* He laid low for a long time after Senor Joe ees keeled and you go away. He ees smart man, the Señor Deacon! He has a hideout that no one knows. Two—three of hees friends leewe there. And he ees most respectable! Oh, so respectable! No one theenks he would ever do anytheeng not mos' respectable! He ees smart! He ees my friend, Señor Buck. One dollar, two dollars, sometimes five dollars he geeves me for what news I can tell heem!"

Buck snorted.

"But who's he ridin' with?" he demanded. "What's he pullin' off? Rustlin'?"

Miguel beamed again.

"Ah! Señor Deacon is discreet! He plans! He contrives! Leettle tricks like small holdups—ah—he plans them, but he takes no reesks. He orders them. Hees men do them. But he remains at home. Only the very beegest, the most important jobs does he ride on. And then always he has a good excuse, told in advance, for being away. Oh, but he ees one smart man!"

Buck Reynolds' eyes narrowed very slightly. Miguel was now serving the Deacon as he had served Buck and Joe—as spy and lookout. If he felt any loyalty of any sort, now it was to the Deacon. But he would talk quite openly to Buck, because nothing he told Buck would be believed against the Deacon. And Miguel would tell nothing specific, anyhow. He would simply be amiable and ingratiating to Buck until the Deacon had decided what was to be done about him. Even then, Miguel would be blandly neutral—and he would cheerfully make himself useful to Buck if the Deacon was put out of the way, or the other way about.

"That's like 'im," snorted Buck. "Settin' back an' lettin' other fellas do his dirty work an' take all the risks! Huh! One thing more. The Señor Joe's widdler, Señora Davis. Wheah's she at an' how's she makin' out?"

"Shee ees here," said Miguel. "She runs an eating-house, Señor Buck. She ees verree proud an' her tongue eet ees sharp! She resolved that none should remember that her husban'—how you say—died with hees boots on. So she taught her son Sam to be a vairy nice leettle boy."

There was an overtone of spite, of malice, in the last. Buck waited.

"Too nice," said Miguel zestfully. "Thee boy, 'e grew weary of being nice. He ees een jail now—at Camino. Hees mother does not yet know, because he gave a false name. She theenks he ees in Tucson. But he ees in Camino, waiting trial for rustleeng."

Buck scowled. Then he turned away.

"Camino, eh? A'right, Miguel."

Miguel said blandly, "When he ees tried, he weel be set free. The Señor Deacon weel testify that they were together at the time of the rustleeng, so of course eet weel seem a mistake. No one believes evil of the Señor Deacon."

Buck stared, hard.

"Yeah? The kid was rustlin' under his orders? So the Deacon gets him outa trouble, an' the kid figures that's the way it'll always be? So he'll go on rustlin' under the Deacon's orders?"

Miguel grinned.

"The Señor Deacon ees smart, no?"

"No!" snapped Buck. "He ain't! You're goin' to tell him all about talkin' to me—he'll, don't lie, Miguel! I know you. When you tell the Deacon about me, tell him I know he shot me from behind, an' that he shot my partner Joe that time we was standin' off the posse. You tell him I've been waitin' to come back an' kill him! An' you tell him I'm heah an' he can go heeled, because I'm sure goin' to let him have it on sight."

Miguel blinked. Buck knew what was in his mind. Miguel considered that Buck had just committed suicide. Because, of course, with men who committed crimes under his orders, a murder wouldn't be much anyhow. And the murder of Buck, a known outlaw just out of the penitentiary, wouldn't count, anyhow. Anybody could claim Buck had tried to hold him up or murder him, and anybody would be believed . . .

Buck's stubborn, truculent countenance darkened.

"Yeah!" he said grimly. "You tell 'im that. He'll get a lotta fun outa it. But he oughta have what fun he can—while he can."

He turned and stalked away toward the main street of Animas. Behind him, Miguel shrugged. Knowing what he did, he had thought it quite likely that the Deacon would have Buck killed anyhow. Now it was quite certain.

Miguel poured himself another glass of wine.

## CHAPTER TWO

## No Fare to Hell

**B**UCK went to see his partner's widow. It was easy to find the place, once the clue had been given. He found the eating-place, immaculately painted and aggressively neat. There was a sign on the door, PLEASE WIPE YOUR FEET. Buck wiped his feet. He went in. The interior was dauntingly tidy. There was another sign, GENTLEMEN WILL REMOVE THEIR HATS. Buck removed his hat. He stood uneasily. There was no one in sight, but he felt himself sweating a little. Therefore he scowled angrily and rapped sharply on the counter.

A voice from somewhere said with asperity, "We serve dinner from twelve to two only. Supper is from six to eight. Please close the door as you go out."

Buck did not stir. After a moment there was a rustling, and Selma Davis, relict of his late partner, came through dimity curtains from the kitchen, her eyes snapping. They fell upon Buck and her mouth opened to repeat the statement that she did not serve meals at any and all hours. Then she recognized Buck. Her mouth stayed open without a word coming out of it.

"Yes, ma'am," said Buck, and despite himself his tone was apologetic. "It's me."

"Well, I never!" said Joe's widow acidly. "Just out of jail and already come to bother respectable people!"

She regarded him with marked disapproval. It had been a long time, of course, and she no longer wept for Joe. She had adjusted herself to widowhood. But her disapproval of Buck had not lessened with the years.

"I knew," she said with acerbity, "that you were due to get out of jail, Buck Reynolds, and I thought it a pity. And I did think you'd have the gumption not to come bothering me. You want the things I've been keeping for you, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Buck, twisting his hat. It enraged him that he felt humble before this woman—it was not his fault that Joe had been an outlaw. It was not his fault that Joe had been killed—or that he had married her. Buck felt a bitter rebellion that Joe's widow was a sharp-tongued pillar of respectability—with a son in jail in Camino that she didn't know about.

"You could've sent for your things," said Joe's widow, indignantly, "instead of coming brazen-like after them. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Buck Reynolds."

"Yes, ma'am," said Buck.

"Leading poor Joe astray," she said, bitingly, "and maybe coming here in hopes of leading his poor son along the same bitter

path! I got your things out and ready. You can have them. But for goodness' sake don't ever come here again."

"No, ma'am," said Buck.

"I'll get 'em," she told him coldly. "Stand right where you are!"

She marched out, back through the dimity curtains. Buck seethed to himself. She returned with a bundle tightly—vengefully—tied up in brown paper.

"My son Sam," she told Buck sternly, "ain't here, if you thought to tell him stories about what a wild life his father had. He's a nice boy and sooner or later I expect he'll marry that Sally Henderson whose father owns the Circle Bar. My friend Mr. Hamby gave him a letter to the proprietor of a big store in Tucson, and Sam's up there now getting a respectable job—maybe so he can get married on it. But all the same, the sooner you make yourself scarce around here, Mr. Buck Reynolds, the better it will be for you!"

Buck swallowed. So the Deacon was her friend. The Deacon who'd shot Buck from behind, had murdered Joe and had young Sam rustling for him already. The devil take all good women, Buck thought bitterly.

"I—uh—don't expect' to stay around long, ma'am."

Joe's widow tapped on the counter of her eating-place. Her eyes snapped.

"I know what you intend to do," she said acidly. "You intend to go up to that hideout you and Joe had. You intend to start up again with that hiding-place to keep you safe. But I've fixed that."

Buck stared at her. Other men had been afraid of him, in days gone by, but she scared him. He said uneasily, "You fixed it, ma'am? Nobody but me an' Joe an' the Deac—you never knew where 'twas, Joe told me!"

"And I didn't—but I've found out!" Her tone was bitter triumph itself. "Looking up your things, because I knew you'd want them, I came on a map poor Joe had made. It was for his son Sam, and it showed just how to get to the hideout. There was a note with it that said in case anything happened to him, Sam could go up there and he might find something he'd want to keep. Guns, probably, or something else equally bad for a young boy to have!"

Buck said thickly, thinking of his partner; "More likely, ma'm, Joe meant there might be a few head o' cattle theah, or some horses that could be sold to—uh—kinda help you out, ma'm. There's good grazin' theah, an' anything that was left would stay in good shape. But—uh—"

The Deacon had known about the hideout, and Miguel said he had a perfect place to lay low in. His men were using it. There'd be no stock there now. Of course.



"It doesn't matter!" snapped Selma Davis triumphantly. "I found the map yesterday. I thought it over all day. So today I sent it to the Sheriff at Camino in a registered letter, telling him he'd better look into it. If you intended to start outlawin' again with that hideout as your headquarters, you'd better not. The sheriff over in Camino knows all about it and how to find it!"

Buck picked up his bundle and stumbled out of the place.

**O**UTSIDE, he swore passionately. He did not swear at Joe's widow, of course, because Buck Reynolds did not swear at a lady even in her absence. But this was disaster! That hideout was to have been the scene of his retirement! It was a sinkhole in the Abogados, a collapsed cavern above an ancient underground stream. It was two hundred feet straight down in the ground, with ten acres of green grass and fresh water at the bottom. There was but one way to get to it, and nobody had known about it but Buck and Joe—and, later, the Deacon. It was a perfect hideout. It was security and peace and isolation and comfort. In the last few years in the penitentiary, Buck had laid it out mentally as a small-sized paradise of gardening, with everything from green peas to his own tobacco growing in neat rows, and the adobe lean-to against the sinkhole wall a riot of blooming flowers. It had been the mainstay of all his dreams. He had planned to live there in utter tranquillity, the world forgetting and by the world forgot. But if the Sheriff at Camino knew about it, he'd drop in every time a few head of cattle or some fancy horse flesh turned up missing. And of course, if Buck found the Deacon and talked things over with him through gun-smoke. . . .

Buck stamped down the street in impassioned despair. Deeply and bitterly he regretted that Joe had ever married a woman like Selma Davis. It was the one flaw in an otherwise perfect partner. And he swore luridly.

Then he stopped short. Joe's son Sam was in the Deacon's gang! His mother thought he was in Tucson, but he'd been riding the hills under the Deacon's directions—and his mother had told the sheriff where to find the hideout of her son's outlaw gang!

That topped everything. Buck flung his hat on the ground and just stopped himself from dancing a war-dance around it in utterly uninhibited fury. Then he saw a small Mexican boy grinning at him and almost had apoplexy from added fury. But then he calmed to a deadliness of mood such as he'd never known when he and Joe were partners.

He went into the Buzzards' Roost Saloon and ordered a beer. He'd been given a rail-

road ticket back home, and a five-dollar bill. He had a dollar and a quarter left.

He got his beer and said with elaborate unconcern, "Uh—I used to hang around this town, years back." The bartender was a total stranger who could not possibly know him. "Used to be a fella name of Hamby around. They called him the Deacon. Is he still on hand?"

The bartender said, "Deacon Hamby? Sure! He's around! 'Ain't in town right now, though. He's off buyin' cattle for somebody up Nogales way."

Buck drank his beer and went out. So he couldn't settle with the Deacon! Fate and chance had it in for him. But there was Joe's son over in the Camino jail. And there was something else. . . .

He stalked back to the alley between two saloons leading to Miguel's house. He stalked into that tumbledown edifice. Miguel's fat wife was visibly alarmed at his return. Miguel, she said apprehensively, had gone to visit a sick cousin. Buck knew better. Miguel had gone to pass on the word that he was back in town and was hunting the Deacon to kill him.

He snorted and opened up his package just enough to glimpse his guns, wrapped in their inside-out cartridge belt. What he was after was the original wrapper, covered over and reinforced by the strong brown paper Joe's widow had put about it the day before. He tore off a big piece of that and then, in Miguel's house, painstakingly, with a stub of pencil, he drew a map. It was, on the face of it, a map of the way to his and Joe's hideout. But anybody who tried to find the hideout by its means would be disappointed. He folded it and put it in his pocket, his expression of truculence intensified. He tied up his parcel again. Just to be on the safe side, since the Deacon wasn't in town, it was best for him not to be wearing guns in case somebody did recognize him as an old lawbreaker.

**H**E TOOK a drink of the wine he'd had Miguel buy, and made a disgusted face.

Then he sat in dour silence in Miguel's house until near sundown. Then he marched down to the railroad station and to the station-agent's window.

The agent was pounding a brass telegraph key at the moment, but he looked up inquiringly.

"When's the next train to Camino?" Buck demanded.

"Six-forty," said the agent. "Mail-train. Two trains a day."

Buck retired. The freight shed was open. It was now late dusk. He strode truculently into the shed. There was nobody there. He unwrapped his parcel. He unrolled his gun-belt and slung it about his waist, reveling in

the feel of the heavy holsters again bumping against his thighs. Expansively, he ran his thumbs along the cartridge-loops—and froze, incredulously. They were empty! Joe's widow had given him back his guns, but she'd thrown out the shells from the belt. He snatched out his guns and examined them furiously. They were empty, too. He raged.

The train-whistle hooted in the distance. There was a clattering of hoofs. Buck, peering out, saw a wagon of unfamiliar type come up to the station with a shotgun messenger beside the driver. It did not ease his wrath. Obviously a shipment of bullion from the stamp-mills at Charleston, routed through Animas away out of routine. It looked like somebody had been holding up bullion-shipments a bit too regularly, or maybe a new route was being tried, or maybe this had become the regular route. In any case—

It was deepest dusk, now. The freight shed was a place of cavernous, odorous darkness. Away and away through the hills, the rhythmic *chuff-chuffing* of the engine became audible. Its whistle hooted again—a long, sustained wailing which echoed and re-echoed among the hills. The engine headlight winked into view and out again. Buck almost burst with rage in the freight shed, surrounded by the smells of baled hay and barreled whiskey and soft pine shipping cases, with that other scent of engine oil which is inseparable from railroad stations.

Men gathered about the guarded wagon. Then one man strolled past the shed door. Buck Reynolds pounced. A gun jammed into the cow-puncher's ribs.

"Step thisaway," snarled Buck under his breath, "or you' goin' to talk to Saint Peter!"

The cowhand gulped. Buck's free hand found his shoulder and he guided his victim into the darkness. His empty gun rose and fell with an infuriated precision. The cowboy crumpled.

The train chuffed more loudly, and then its noise dwindled as it passed between intervening hills. It was night. The noises of Animas were clear between the puffings of the engine. A piano in a dance hall. Somebody whooping joyously as he rode into town for a night's festivity. The stamping of horses' hoofs. Now and again the squeaking of harness about the guarded wagon.

There were small clickings in the freight-shed where Buck Reynolds swore balefully in a subdued voice over the obstacles to his planned future of peace and quiet. The distant headlight of the train winked on and off and suddenly appeared, seemingly very near and shining as brightly as the brightest oil lamp before the most highly polished reflector could shine. The train itself appeared as a row of dimly lighted windows down the track.

Buck stalked out. His guns were slung at his side. The loops of his cartridge-belt were filled. He scowled at the train as it roared grandly into the station, its high-waisted cow-catcher the last word in locomotive grandeur, its funneled smokestack belching sparks, its polished brass-work and red and gilt name-plate impressive even by the feeble lamps of the station. It halted with a splendid out-pouring of steam. There was a locomotive and a mail and express car, and no less than three palatial passenger coaches on behind.

Leaning dourly against the station wall, Buck looked into the plush and mahogany interiors of the coaches. He saw the elaborate, swinging oil-lamps with which the coaches were lighted. He even saw the rotund, polished stove in each. He saw the passengers—cattlemen, miners, celluloid-collared travelers, screening their eyes with their fingers to gaze at the little cowtown through the darkness.

There was swift, orderly confusion up by the express car. Men loaded very heavy, very small, very strong boxes into the car. It was unquestionably a bullion-shipment, and a big one. Then mailbags went aboard. The clerk signed receipts while Buck glowered at the scene. He had exactly a dollar in his pocket. His old partner's son was in the Camino jail and this train would carry a complete divulgement of the best hideout in the world to the sheriff in Camino. He had no horse. He had no friends. He had just committed assault and robbery which could send him to jail for the rest of his life as an old offender. And presently he would be hunted by various gunmen, bent upon killing him before he could get at the Deacon. Perhaps his old partner's son would be assigned the job of killing him. . . .

The mail coach door slid shut. The train bell clanged resonantly. The whistle howled. With a monstrous, deliberate, *chuffing* the train rolled out of the station.

Buck waited until two coaches had passed him by. He stood by the bay window from which the station agent at the telegraph key could look up and down the line. There was a smoky oil lamp with a reflector casting a bright light on the telegraph-table.

Buck poked the muzzle of one of his guns through the window. The sound of the train drowned out the tinkle of broken glass. He shot twice. The telegraph instrument was wreckage. Then he ran across the platform, swung on the steps of the very last car and put the palm of his hand in the face of the conductor who, lantern swinging, essayed also to board the last coach in the time-honored fashion of train-conductors.

It all happened fast. The conductor went rolling over the cinders of the platform. His lantern bounced crazily. The train went roaring magnificently off into the night, its *chuff-*



ings thunderous and its whistle hooting, so that the startled outcry from the men about the station went unheard.

Buck Reynolds opened the door of the last coach and stepped inside. His expression was defiant and challenging. The lights of Animas dwindled and went out, behind. The train traveled on, wheels clanking loudly over rail joints, the coaches swaying, the opal-globed lamps swinging dizzily, the air in its coaches filled with the mingled smells of engine smoke, oil lamp fumes, patchouli, bergamot, dusty plush and chewing tobacco.

The engine whistled valorously—*Whir-r-r-rooo-o-o-o!*

Buck, his hands on his gun-butts, stalked down the aisle.

### CHAPTER THREE

By the Guns Forgot

THE point was, of course, that it was all completely unexpected. And Buck, truculent as he appeared, was no flamboyant figure with a bandana mask and bellying voice, such as most people associate with violence. He went through the last coach. He grimly wrenched open its front door, and grimly closed it behind him, and marched across the bumping platforms between the cars, and wrenched open the door of the second coach. He looked like a passenger taken on board at Animas. He traversed the second coach, and automatically swerved to keep from brushing against the billowing ostrich plumes on the hat of a bedizened lady passenger. He went through the third coach and out its front door.

The train was not two minutes out of Animas when he banged on the door of the mail-and-express car, after trying its handle and finding it locked. And it is not normal for violence to be attempted within two minutes after a train leaves a station. The mail clerk naturally assumed that the knocking was the conductor with some last-minute information or an order picked up at the station left behind. He opened the door.

Buck pushed in, put a six-gun in the clerk's ribs. He closed the door behind him and locked it. There was not much light in the car—only a single tin-shaded lamp over the sorting rack where the clerk separated mail received en route. There was a desk, on which bills of lading and similar papers were spiked on a sharpened nail. There were boxes and bales and stacks of corrugated iron sheets and rolls of tarpaper. And half a dozen bags of mail.

The mail-clerk gasped, "Hey! You—you don't know what you're doin'!"

Buck prodded him on.

"I got me an idea," said Buck. "Get up theah by the light!"

He backed his captive half the length of the swaying car. Here, so close to the engine, the swayings were wild and the puffings loud indeed, but even the engine's chuffings were minor sounds compared to the roaring noise of the wheels on the rails, the thunderous clanking of rail-joints and the squeakings and bumpings of loose objects here and there.

"I hope you got some good rope handy," Buck said conversationally, "so's I can tie you up instead of havin' to shoot you."

"I—" The clerk stared at him, terrified. "I—hey! You're Buck Reynolds!"

Buck pressed the gun muzzle closer.

"You guessed right the first time," he said harshly. "So y'll know I ain't foolin'! Wheah's y'rope—"

The clerk suddenly grinned. He was ashen in the flickering light of the oil lamp and his grin was distinctly shaky, but it was a grin.

"L-listen!" he said, and swallowed. "You used to ride with Deacon Hamby."

"He rid with me," said Buck, his face hard.

"Th-that's right," panted the clerk urgently. "Well—listen! He's going to hold up this train tonight!"

Buck almost rocked back on his heels—or maybe it was a lurching of the car. After an instant he licked his lips.

"Maybe. Interestin', if true. I'm goin' to tie you up first, an' then you can talk."

The clerk continued to grin, as shakily as before.

"You—you don't want to run up against the Deacon's gang! That's the bullion from the Blue Bird in those boxes. The Deacon and some of his gang are going to hold us up over by Yucca Pass. You—you're a friend of his. You'd better throw in with him instead of trying a lone holdup. The whole train crew's in on this!"

"I'll think it over," said Buck grimly. "Wheah's y'rope?"

The clerk trembled. Buck's face was not reassuring in the lamplight.

"L-listen! The Deacon's got everything fixed. You want to throw in with him—he's got the best hideout in the world—"

"Just for y'information," Buck said sardonically, "I only wanted to get a free ride to Camino, not havin' money to pay my fare."

He had left the clerk where he could not possibly see what went on at his desk and sat down comfortably to examine the mail. There was one parcel of registered mail from Animas, of three envelopes only. He slipped one out of the string around them. It was addressed to the Sheriff at Camino.

"As far as the Deacon's concerned," he observed detachedly to the clerk who could not watch him, "I just got outa the penitentiary."

I aim to have peace an' quiet. I'm goin' to raise flowers an' vegetables. I'm retired from out-lawin'. Why should I get mixed up in a hold-up? I aim to be law-abidin' from now on."

The envelope in his hand was the one Joe Davis' widow had mailed to the Sheriff in Camino. Buck delicately licked the outside of the adhesive flap, held the wetted envelope above the lamp-chimney. The heat of the flame turned the moisture to steam. The flap peeled back. Buck carefully drew out the map his partner had made for his son and looked at it. It was close enough to the one he'd drawn.

He took out the map he'd made and slid it into the envelope. He pressed down the flap until it adhered. He slid the envelope back with the two other registered letters under their string. Then he touched a match to the original map and held it until it scorched his fingers. He stamped the ashes on the floor with a vast satisfaction.

He considered the possibility of throwing a monkey wrench into the Deacon's comprehensive plans. He could recruit a posse, perhaps, from the passengers—if they'd believe him. But the mail-clerk, bound, would not be likely to inspire confidence. The rest of the crew would not cooperate. Even if he forced them to drive on through the block the Deacon would have ready, there'd be that affair at Animas to turn up afterward. A cowhand gun-whipped into unconsciousness and the telegraph instrument smashed, the forcible removal of the train-conductor from the schemes of things—no, an old-time outlaw could not turn into the hero of an attempted train-robbery in the space of hours. And there was Joe's son in the jail at Camino.

"It looks to me," Buck told the clerk acidily, "like I got to think about my skin. I think, fella, I'm goin' to get ready for company."

He set to work to shift freight. The train roared and rumbled on. It swayed and lurched and bounced and rattled. It squeaked and groaned and boomed and bumped. In the express-car, Buck staggered as he shifted the express-parcels and freight according to his notions of strategy.

THE train went on through the night. Back in the passenger coaches a gentleman dressed so elaborately that he must be a gambler, made tentative advances to a lady so vividly tinted that her acceptance of his overtures was not surprising. A cowman slept heavily in his seat. A miner dozed. A woman with a small child in her arms seemed to be singing softly to it, though no sound could be heard. Only her lips moved, absorbedly. The train lamps swung and smoked and flickered, and the windows made shuddering noises, and outside there was only dark-

ness. Only black night, with no lights of houses anywhere, and only the varying echoes of the train—now hollow and thunderous, now flat but still loud—to tell that sometimes it rolled over open range, and now and again through a more or less shallow cut.

At long last Buck mopped his forehead and sat down again. He saw the bound feet of the mail clerk beating a frantic tattoo on the floor. He'd paid no attention to his captive's voice over the noise of the train. He rolled the man over.

"What's on y'mind now?"

"We—we must be almost there!" gasped the clerk. "Buck—don't let the Deacon think I double-crossed him. He'll kill me—"

"Not much loss," grunted Buck, "but I'll set you up wheah you can explain things to him."

He hauled the clerk upright. He seated him in the anchored swinging chair at the desk. He tied him there. And then he pulled the cork from the clerk's ink-bottle and shoved it into the helpless man's mouth.

"Jest so you don't start too soon, I'm corkin' your mouth," he observed grimly. "If you spit out that cork, you get plugged!"

Then he sat at ease and rolled himself a smoke. The car was filled with smells and noises. The lamp smell mingled with the odor of dust, and all the present contents and many past cargoes contributed individual accents to the atmosphere. Buck smoked placidly, his eyes roving idly. Twice they went sharply to his captive as that individual made violent facial contortions around the ink-soaked cork. The movement of Buck's hand toward his gun butt seemed remarkably soothing.

The engine's whistle howled a banshee wail. There was a violent screaming of brakes, and a monstrous series of crashes as the passenger coaches bumped and rebounded against their couplings, and the whole train screamed to a halt.

For perhaps a second after it was still, there was silence, then guns went off in rapid succession outside, on either side of the train. Men beside the track were shooting along the line of coaches to keep the passengers in. There were piercing yells.

Somebody swung up behind the express car. There was a rattling of the link-pin and coupling. A bellow announced achievement.

Buck turned baleful eyes upon his prisoner, who seemed about to strangle on the inky cork. He continued to sit at ease. Shouts and a shot came from the direction of the engine—for effect only, for there wasn't further commotion.

The train jerked into motion again. It picked up speed quickly. There were now only the locomotive and its tender and the mail-and-express car—the truncated train



went racketing away through the darkness.

Buck listened carefully to the pounding on the door in the back, where the robbers wanted to be let in.

"Wheah'll the wagon be waitin' for the bullion?" he asked the clerk grimly. "No—keep that cork in y'mouth! How far? Ten miles? Twenty?"

He could almost guess the answer, knowing the location of the hideout to which the booty would be taken. The clerk nodded desperately at the word "Twenty." Buck rose.

"You set quiet," he commanded. "An' you better still have that cork in y'mouth when I step back this way!"

He went to the front of the car. He had labored earnestly to pile as much as possible of the car's contents against the back door. Nobody could get in that way, but even with the engineer and fireman in the plot it was likely that at least one outlaw would be riding in the engine cab.

Buck opened the front door suddenly, gun ready, but the platform there was empty. He saw the blank wall of the tender before him and sparks shooting from the smokestack ahead. He heard the whistling of wind and the clanking of rail-joints and the monstrous puffings of the locomotive. The swayings here were wild and violent.

He climbed the short ladder to the back of the tender. The engineer and fireman were alone. They grinned excitedly to each other, shouting occasional exuberant comments above the train noise.

When Buck appeared suddenly behind them, they jumped. Then they grinned at him, thinking him one of the outlaw gang.

"How's it goin'?" bellowed the engineer. "Everything all right?"

Buck poked with his gun.

"Everything's all wrong," he said grimly. "Slow up—you're goin' to jump."

He meant it. They saw that he meant it. They looked sick with fear. Their logic would be that the Deacon would save money if they were killed. He wouldn't have to divide with them. . . .

The engineer jumped first. The fireman, with a gasp, jumped instantly thereafter. And Buck looked deliberately around the cab, found the throttle, and pulled it a little wider open.

**F**OR safety's sake he opened the furnace-door and heaved in fuel. There was no point in watching out along the line. If anything went wrong there, there was nothing he could do about it. The train racketed on through the night. On the express car's back platform, men pounded at the door until fury overtook them. Buck kept an eye on the car roof, counting accurately on the sparks from

the smokestacks to give him light to see by. Presently he saw a man crawling fearfully along the top. It was not a comfortable spot, with the car swaying crazily on badly-laid rails and nothing to cling to.

Buck opened fire. What with the noise it took three shots to make that man realize that he was being shot at. The other turned around precariously and crawled back. Buck beamed. He opened the furnace door and heaved in more fuel. There was a cord hanging close by the engineer's seat. It ran forward over the boiler. He pulled it, and a satisfying, earth-shaking bellow came from the whistle.

Five minutes. Ten—fifteen. There would be argument behind the express car. On the narrow, rocking platform, those who had officially held up this train would be debating frenziedly what could be wrong—the door of the car barricaded, and someone shooting from the cab. Presently another man essayed to crawl forward. Buck drove him back, too, with bullets.

A fire appeared beside the track. The train roared toward it. The whistle bellowed in an exotic sequence of short and long hootings, suggesting derision. The locomotive thundered up to the welcoming figures by the fire, where a wagon waited hopefully for the train's cargo of treasure, its sides illuminated by the fire. The train hurtled on, its whistle howling in a humorous greeting and farewell. The fire was left behind. There was again only the night beneath the stars.

But as the miles sped by, the outlaws on the back platform grew desperate. They hadn't the least idea of the actual situation, beyond a profound conviction that they had been betrayed. But they knew they had either to get into a more favorable position than their present one, or jump from the racing train.

The roof of the express car wasn't practical with bullets sweeping it. They attacked the door. Bullets smashed its lock. Gun butts broke in its panels. Brute strength wrenched the frame loose, in fragments. And then they began to smash their way through the barricade Buck had piled against it.

When they crawled, six-guns in hand, through the last smashed box to bar their way, they saw the mail clerk sitting in his chair in the light of his desk-light, swathed in rope like a mummy. Like a mummy's, too, was his drawn, white, panic-filled face. Deacon Hamby advanced upon him while the other three savagely scouted the rest of the interior of the car. They saw the bullion-boxes, but hardly noticed them. Their own getaway was the important thing now.

The mail-clerk babbled unintelligently. Buck had crawled to the back of the tender to watch. He let the Deacon shoot his confederate in cold blood. When he roared at his followers

to storm the tender, Buck beat a retreat. The cab would permit him steadier aim and he had no bullets to waste.

They swarmed over the back of the tender with their guns ready. A bullet knocked Buck's hat askew. Four men came plunging down the heaped-up fuel, and were partly blinded by the glare of the open furnace door. Buck shot very grimly and very savagely, making sure to wait that last fifth of a second before pulling trigger, so that he wouldn't miss.

He didn't. Lead spattered all around him. Something burned his hip. But he got the first man almost at the back of the tender. He got a second little nearer. The third man was half-way toward him, squinting agonizedly and spraying lead at random.

Buck's old six-gun almost touched the Deacon when he pulled trigger.

WHEN he looked up grimly from the carnage he had wrought, the lights of Camino were winking into view on the horizon. He threw in more fuel. He opened the throttle. He tied down the whistle-cord. He sent the locomotive hurtling into the town, bellowing as no train should bellow on any normal occasion. He flashed past the station, cut off steam, so the train would come to a stop a quarter-mile past the signal lights, and slipped off and into the darkness before it had ceased to roll.

Nobody ever understood it. Nobody ever figured it all out. The train had obviously been held up. The passengers told about that later, and there was plenty of evidence to boot. But it had arrived in Camino with its bullion untouched, its mail clerk bound in his chair and then shot dead, the car door smashed in—and four dead men in the engine-cab and tender.

Three of them were well-known outlaws. The fourth was that highly respectable citizen, Deacon Hambly. It looked like he'd been with the outlaws, not against them. But nobody was ever sure, because nobody ever really knew who'd done the shooting. The engineer and fireman, picked up later, protested abysmal ignorance about everything. Suggestions that Buck Reynolds was responsible were pooh-poohed. He was an outlaw himself, and had been so broke that he'd had to rob a cow-puncher of shells for his guns—he couldn't have had a gang working with him. It was generally assumed that Buck slipped out of the passenger-coaches and skipped when they were detached from the engine. He'd figured to run out, no matter what his share in the doings, and a man who runs doesn't slaughter four hardcases, provided Deacon had dealt himself a hand with outlaws.

Half an hour after his arrival in Camino,

Buck said peevishly to a startled young man, skulking beside him behind a closed-up general store, "I got you outa jail, didn't I? You hush up—no, the Deacon didn't send me. I stuck up the jailer an' gun whipped 'im to sleep on my own account. Your pa used to be my partner an' I done it for him. Now you let me handle this! I'll get us a coupla horses in a minute, but first I got to get in heah—"

He broke into the general store rather quietly, considering he was a little out of practice and in a hurry, and, fifteen minutes later, came out stuffing small envelopes in his pockets. He led Joe Davis' son away from that neighborhood, expertly stole two saddled horses, and the two of them rode out of town within the hour.

Then, until dawn, Buck Reynolds spoke pungently to the son of his partner. He pointed out the certainty that his mother would learn of his evil-doing if he persisted in it, and he pointed to his own term in the penitentiary as a further deterrent.

"Besides which," he said acidly, as the first rays of the sun appeared to eastward, "besides which, outa respect for your pa who was the best partner a man ever had, if I ever heah of you stealin' as much as a yellow dawg in the future, I'll come an' tend to you!"

Young Sam Davis was chastened by then. News that he had served his father's murderer and had depended on him for his own safety, was humiliation past repair. With the Deacon dead, too, he could not even make a grand gesture of revenge. About all he could do was go to Tucson and try to get a job in a store there, or maybe—well—maybe he'd better go back to Animas and go to work on the Circle Bar. At least, if he did that, he'd see Sally Henderson sometimes. . . .

Buck saw that he was subdued when they parted. So subdued, in fact, that he felt it wise to give him sage advice about how to get rid of the stolen horse the boy was riding.

"Bury th' saddle," he advised, "an' turn th' critter loose. Walk a few miles home, thinkin' over what you're goin' to tell your ma, meanwhile. An' when she tells you I'm a scoundrel, you agree with her."

He waved his hand and rode away. He was out of sight in half a mile. And he was perfectly happy. He was out of the penitentiary, he had settled with the Deacon, and he was on his way to the hideout he and Joe Davis had known. His pockets were stuffed with assorted packets of seeds for gardening—taken from the general store in Camino—and he looked forward to long years of perfect peace, with ten acres to turn into a garden in his retirement, and with nobody to bother him.

Unless, of course, he had to kill one or two of the Deacon's gang who might have been let into the secret of the hideout's location.



And because he feared to say them the words forced themselves out: "Why—Black Jack Forbes. . . ."

By **BRYCE  
WALTON**



# DEAD TRAIL'S — END —

**T**HE small gray man flattened against the wall with his hands spread wide, and his mustache quivering with fear. The other man's blue bandanna mask had slipped down accidentally, and he hated to recognize the lean brown face, and the brittle eyes.

And because he feared to say it, the words forced themselves out: "Why—Black Jack Forbes!"

Forbes slid the mask up again, jammed the sack of greenbacks beneath his shirt.

He said, "Yore jaw's too slack."

His eyes went dark and hard.

The little man screamed, "No—No, Black Jack! I won't tell 'ary a soul—"

The long barreled Colt exploded with an

eager thunder in the small office. The gray little man slammed back against the wall, slid down slowly. There was a big hole in his chest.

Forbes backed out onto the boardwalk. At the end of the street of false fronts, he saw a wagon swinging left, after crossing Turkey Creek. It was starting down the street, pulled by a team of wild looking buckskins. Out of a saloon a little way down, a number of men ran out with drawn guns, attracted by the shot. They started firing when they saw Forbes, then broke, scattering for cover. Some of them dodged behind the loading platform of the general store.

Forbes started for the big gelding he'd left waiting at the hitch-rail. A shot splintered

*"Until death do us part—" meant  
little to Black Jack Forbes—until he  
met a woman who was won—and lost  
—on the speed of a bullet!*

the boards at his feet, sprayed dust. Forbes snapped a quick answer, and a face disappeared from a roof across the road, giving out a thin scream.

From the other end of the street a number of riders were approaching slowly. Forbes crouched low and ran. He was firing steadily. A bullet ran a hot furrow along the nape of his neck.

He reached the snorting, heaving gelding. He had one foot in the stirrup. Then he felt the big gelding shudder against him from the heavy slug. It lifted its head and cried out softly like a wounded woman, then pitched to its knees. It struggled to rise, its neck pumping bright red heart's blood, then it rolled over on its side.

Forbes belly-crawled tight up against the dead animal. Hot pain and rage mingled in his blood. He saw one man among the horse-men with a smoking carbine. "This is for you, honey," said Black Jack in the dead gelding's ear. He fired across the horse's flank.

The rider threw up his hands with a sharp yell, toppled back. The other riders broke, hugged the shadows along the right side of the street. They were waiting now. For that instant the whole street was still. They'd either rush him suddenly, or work out a way to smoke him free without a risk on their part.

Anyway, he thought, it looks like they really got Black Jack Forbes.

HE SMILED, but there was no mirth in the smile. It was the expression of a trapped animal trying to justify its shame. He uncased the other gun, reloaded the hot one. He slid the carbine from the saddle boot of the gelding and laid it beside him.

The sun overhead burned directly down on him with a hazy, merciless glare. Alkali dust whirled down the still street. Then he noticed the man standing directly across the street in the shade of the Old Thompson Saloon porch. He must have been standing there all the time, but Black Jack hadn't seen him. The man must have sensed that he was seen, for he stepped nervously toward Forbes.

Forbes leveled his six-gun. The man was a dude—he wore a long frock coat and a black string tie. He was tall and handsome, but with a white tinhorn pallor to his face. He looked scared.

He stood there helplessly. He wore no guns. He just stood there looking hopelessly at Black Jack, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Don't shoot," he yelled in a trembling voice. "Give me a chance. I don't have a gun—I—"

Black Jack grinned. It was a trick, of

course. The man started to walk to one side. He started to lift a hand.

"Yo're in the wrong corral, mister," said Black Jack.

The bullet caught the man in the belly. He folded to one side, his mouth hanging open, then closing and opening again, wordlessly. Blood ran out between his fingers as he grasped his stomach. He was on his knees. He knelt there for a while like he was praying.

"Wait—don't—" he called weakly. He raised a red hand.

Another slug from Forbes' gun smashed into his head. He went back and lay still. A harsh murmur of heated rage boiled up along the street. Forbes gripped both guns, his body tensed for the going-out party.

Then he heard the sudden pounding and banging. His eyes twisted to the right. The wagon and the team of buckskins were coming at him hell-bent—a runaway team! The frightened horses were bucking down hard to the harness, snorting, manes flying, hoofs pounding the dust. Strings of saliva curled back over wild eyes like wet cobwebs.

Only then did Forbes see that the driver, frantically trying to rein down the plunging buckskins, was a girl. Dressed in a doeskin skirt and bright calico blouse, a small blob of frightened face, and a stream of wild hair blowing.

Forbes' legs were tense under him like steel springs. He knew then that it wasn't Black Jack's time, that he'd get out of town.

He was running, bent low, guns bucking as he sprinted across the few feet of space separating him from the oncoming wagon. He cased one gun, kept firing the other as he grabbed desperately for the iron brace on the wagon side. The gun flew from his hand as the speeding rig whipped him hard in the air, slammed him against the side. His arm felt torn from its socket.

Then he threw himself over the side, and flattened on the straw-covered bottom. The girl, frantically trying to rein down the team, wasn't looking back. He noticed the pull of her lithe body, straining at the reins.

"Never mind tryin' to hold them horses back, ma'am," yelled Black Jack. "Jus' give 'em their head, and let 'em buck. I might fer-git yo're a lady an' I got my sights right on you."

He watched the girl's slim body relax weakly on the seat. He felt the sudden surging lunge of the team stretching out in a mad run. The wagon bounced and leaped, and Black Jack stayed low and snapped shots at anything appearing over the rim of the wagon.

His smile was grim. He couldn't have gotten a better break than this if he had planned it himself. No one was firing at the outbound wagon. They were afraid of hitting the girl.



He finally raised up, looked back at the clustered knots of men. He saw a number of them running for horses; then the wagon careened round a whiplash in the road. After that the rig was swaying wildly down the canyon trail with the purple Chiricahua Mountains on the right.

"Jus' keep them horses prancin', ma'am," drawled Black Jack. "I don't reckon they'll chance a shot with you sittin' up there so purty. After night-time comes aroun', I'll take one of the buckskins an' be long gone by mornin'."

He was talking more to himself than to the girl as the wagon bounced down the rocky road. But the horses were slowing now, and the sun blazed on the turning bunch grass, hock high and rich, and on the dark chaparral and yucca trickling up into the draws.

He crawled over the seat and sat down beside the girl. Her neck was slim and strong, and her calico blouse was blown tight against the slim roundness of her body. Her skin was soft and brown, and her hair blew out behind her in a wild cloud.

The team was slowing as she handled the reins with practiced skill. The horse's hoofs thudded rhythmically on the gray dust, and behind them, their trail was lost.

Then she turned and looked directly at him. And Black Jack got the biggest surprise of his life. It came out of him, before he even thought what he was saying.

"Why—yo're real purty, ma'am."

She blushed, then smiled and her teeth were as white as the polished bones of his side guns. She said gently. "Why—thank you, Mr.—"

He tensed, and his hand gripped the butt of his gun. His face tightened. "That wouldn't be wise fer you to know. You might hafta travel with me clean out of this country now—an' if you caused me any trouble, I might even have to shoot you, I reckon."

He had lost his mask, but somehow he didn't think a woman would know his face.

But she said suddenly, "There's only one Black Jack."

He peered closely into her black bright eyes. They were warm and soft, and little delicate beads of moisture colored her upper lip. There was no hint of fear in her face. He studied her, unbelieving.

Black Jack had never had any trouble with women, but he had never even talked with a girl like this. Certainly not in a friendly way.

"What do you mean, ma'am?"

She laughed. "Look at me, Black Jack, listen to how I talk. I'm no wild West girl. I'm from way back East and I've only been here a few weeks." Her voice fell. "And I don't like it here, Black Jack. I was going crazy back there in Galeyville. The loneliness—"

"Go on an' talk, ma'am. I'm tryin' to figure yore angle."

"I was married back East and came out here, but I can't stand it here. Maybe you don't understand women, Black Jack—maybe you do. But wherever there's a lonely woman, there is a woman who dreams of someone like Black Jack Forbes."

He stared at her, then laughed. "Yo're a-funnin' me. An' yo're in a right big mess of trouble. I'm takin' no chance with you."



## THE DOOMED DONS OF VILLALTAS

by Van Cort

Over that heat-seared, devil's domain eight men and a woman struggled on their grim jornada toward the distant Tornado Mountains—toward water, life and a fortune in Spanish gold! But the dread Villalta curse decreed that only one rider could win his way beyond those far-off mountains to the Border—with a ghastly story he could never tell!

—also—

## BLOOD-MONEY PARDNERS

a novel

by Walt Coburn

And stories by Shad Collins, Frank Bonham, William R. Cox, Thomas Thompson and Gene Kivett in the big December issue.

On Sale Now!

15c **DIME** ALL STORIES COMPLETE  
**WESTERN**  
MAGAZINE

She turned, the reins slack in her slim hands. She abruptly pressed her shoulder hard against him, and one hand fell down warmly on his heavily muscled forearm. What she said then hit him like a square fist.

"I was getting ready to get out of here on my own, Black Jack. Away from this awful loneliness." Her hand gripped his wrist, hard. A delicate pink flush suffused her neck, climbed into her face. "Listen, Black Jack, let me go with you."

Forbes was speechless. But a warm, incredulous eagerness, a sense of importance he had never known before, swept through him. His mouth thinned, and harsh lines ran down to the corners of his lips. He pulled her hard against him.

"YOU kin come along for a spell, ma'am. I don't rightly believe you, but I'll do it—till you give me some reason to stop believin'. An' when thet happens, ma'am—why, you'll wish to hell you'd never met Black Jack Forbes."

She laughed and threw back her head. Her eyes danced in the setting sunlight, like motes of eager color. Her teeth flashed, and her hair was a tangled web of beauty for him to see.

Then she turned and looked deeply into his eyes. "Thanks, Black Jack. You'll never know how much this means to me."

So they drove the buckskins hard and fast, and they crossed Turkey Creek and into Sulphur Springs valley with the purple Chiricahua Mountains on the right.

When he had looked back now and then, he'd seen far in the rear a covey of riders, sticking persistently to their trail like wood-ticks. But they stayed just out of gunshot range. They were afraid of his fire.

He didn't ask her name. Somehow that didn't seem important to him now. A girl like this didn't need a name, because surely there couldn't be another girl like this in the world. Beautiful, well-bred, educated, yet filled with a wild longing in her heart like he had always had as long as he could remember.

"We'll go to Frisco," he said as they sent the wagon up a narrow draw, and kept on driving in the dusk, further from the main trail. "We'll unhitch the horses an' ride all night. In the mornin' we'll buy a couple of good brons from a Mexican hostelry in Tombstone. They'll ask me no questions. An' then it's Frisco, ma'am, the wildest town on earth."

He talked for a long time. She listened. And finally they stopped in the shadow of a buttress of wind-curved rock. A narrow canyon-like valley with a cottonwood fringed stream ran beneath the opposite cliffs.

"We'll rest here a spell," Black Jack said

simply. They climbed from the wagon and stretched, beating the gray alkali dust from their clothes. He admired the lithe strength of her, then shifted uneasily.

The broad green leaves of the cottonwoods rustled. Something brown moved beyond a clump of pines a few yards away. He saw the antlers of the buck; then it leaped away in a flurry of nervous energy.

"Yo're like thet," he said simply. And he figured that that was about as romantic as he'd ever had a chance to be in his life. He lit a small fire and slid a log near it. The girl sat down, hugging her knees, and sighed deeply as she stared into the flames. Her hand reached out and dropped on top of his hand. He didn't move. Sweat broke out over his face.

"What were you like when you were a child," she asked abruptly.

He shrugged. "Don't rightly know. Never thought 'bout it much. Dad was a nester. An' the big ranchers dry-gulched him in the Lincoln Country war. My mother died right after that, but then she was never much fer livin' anyway. The heat and the dust took her life out of her long before thet. Thet wasn't far back. I swore I'd git everyone a' them black-legs, an' I did. An' then—I don't know—I strayed on the owlhoot after that."

Her voice was soft. "Believe me, Black Jack, I'm glad you let me come along with you. I'm going to make you happy. The only way you can ever really be happy now."

He swallowed hard.

"Do you believe me," she asked.

"Shore," he said. "I reckon I do. But that don't make no difference, ma'am. As long as you play the cards square with me, I'll play it thet way. But jus' one dirty play—"

His voice was brittle again, and cold. She shivered a little bit. He stood up and took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders.

She said. "I know your reputation, Black Jack."

"We ain't got no time nor cause for slack-jawin' now, ma'am," he said. "I think we'd better git some rest. Jus' you ease out by the fire here an' see if you can catch some sleep. In an hour or so, we'll unhitch the horses an' get through the pass."

She slid down off the log and stretched out, facing the fire. She said softly. "You'd better get some sleep, too."

He sat down with his back against the front wagon wheel. "One of us has got to stay awake. Though I don't rightly think them jaspers'll find that cut off we took for a spell."

"Then you better rest first," she said. "And I'll watch. If they find us, it will be later on, and you'll be on watch by then. I wouldn't know what to do. I might fail you, Black Jack. I'll learn, but give me time."



He nodded. He was very tired. The firelight shone his face as a drawn, harsh mask. His eyes were deep and sullen shadows. He tilted his Stetson over them.

His breath became heavy, irregular. His head fell to one side and his flat-brimmed sombrero drifted onto the ground. A shock of black curls tumbled over his forehead.

The girl rose quietly and walked toward him. She sat down close to him and looked into his face. She had waited a long time until he moved his hand. Insects chirped from the trees. The broad cottonwood leaves rustled gently in the cool night wind. She looked up. The sky was vast and clear, splashed with a solid sea of stars.

She reached out quickly and jerked the gun from its holster. She got to her feet, stepped back against the firelight with the six-gun pointed right at his chest.

"Black Jack," she whispered. "Time to wake up."

He opened his eyes without moving either his head or his body. Only his hand moved, a sudden blur that slapped against his empty holster, then lifted slowly as his body straightened out. His eyes froze into brilliant beads of hate.

His voice was brittle, but it was tired, tired and old. "What's the play, ma'm?"

"I said I was going to give you happiness," she said, shifting the gun. "The only happiness you'll ever find." The gun looked big and cumbersome in her small hand, but it was steady.

"I feel sorry for you, Black Jack. You never had a chance to be decent, though you could have been. But I hate you and I can't

help it. I hate you more than I can tell you, so I won't try. But it's enough to kill you."

"Why, ma'm?"

"I hate you so much that I wanted to kill you myself, rather than let those riders catch you and do it. I'm going to kill you without giving you a chance. I'm not a man—I can't act according to a gentleman's code of killing, any more than you did back in Galeyville."

She saw his muscles tense, his legs gathering under him. But his voice was ragged and tired. His muscles around his mouth were lax, and the hollowness stayed around his eyes.

"This is yore real hand then, ma'm?"

She nodded. "I was raised in the West. But I went back East to school. I married back there. I just came back two weeks ago. I loved my husband, Black Jack. But you wouldn't understand. You never got a chance to learn. My husband was the man you killed back there in the street. The tall man, the one dressed like a dude. The man who was trapped there and who begged you to give him a chance. But the man you didn't give any chance at all. He didn't even have a gun. He didn't know anything about the West, Black Jack. You taught him everything he was to know about it."

He grunted, put all his effort into a desperate attempt to reach her before she fired.

The gun roared, leaped back. The bullet tore into his chest, slammed him back against the wagon wheel. He lay there gasping, his boots digging into the soft cool earth.

She dropped the gun, and stumbled back. Then she sagged down weakly on the ground. She sat there watching Black Jack Forbes die, and waiting for the dawn.



## THE NORTHWEST MOUNTED

were a bunch of wet-eared, brass-buttoned greenhorns to those boot-tough Montana horse-thieves . . . until they learned that the red-coated arm of Canadian law is so damned long that it can reach down across the Line—and trip an American gallows trap!

### RIDE HOME TO THE HANG-TREE!

a north country novel

by Walt Coburn

### GAMBLER, TURN 'ROUND AND DIE!

by Harrison Colt

### Hoss Greer Bets on Bullets!

by

Harry F. Ohmsted

And four more smashing pioneer novels by Frank Bonham, Bennett Foster, Marvin de Vries and Thomas Thompson, in the December issue—on sale Nov. 7!

25c

**STAR**  
**WESTERN**  
ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

*It's easier to kill a man than to bury his memory—and the greedy guns he had once refused to face still spoke to Wayne Moreland from his father's tomb!*



He dropped to his knees, jerked out his Colt and fired.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Last Stop—Gunsmoke

**A**T THE Whiskey Creek swing station, Long Slim Carnavan, the driver, waited till the wheelers were unhooked, then stood up, stretching luxuriously before he finally stepped down from his high throne and

scuffled up to the road ranch for a glass of something to cut the dust in his throat.

The stock-tender came down from the corral, driving the fresh teams, but none of the passengers disembarked. The natural human



By  
**KENNETH FOWLER**



# DEATH IS MY HERITAGE

curiosity that had shown some signs of flowering earlier in the journey now seemed to have died in all of them. They sat slouched in their seats, eyeing each other apathetically, and only the tall, lankily built passenger who had boarded the stage at Hat Creek Junction, two hundred miles to the south, still seemed disposed to the amenities.

Mr. Wayne Moreland had one of the front seats. His tallness in the narrow confines of the coach, where it was impossible to relax comfortably, was more marked than it would have been elsewhere; but in the dim interior, with the side curtains drawn against the heat and dust, his narrow, high-ridged face was cast in shadow, and only his pale, keen blue eyes betrayed his active and continuing interest in his fellow-passengers.

Particularly, Moreland realized with a sudden sharp self-consciousness, his glance had been shifting, more and more frequently, to the pale blonde who sat in the back seat, directly across from him. The rouge which tinted her cheeks had been applied skillfully, but seemed only to accentuate what appeared to be a natural pallor of her cream-colored skin, and her lips, also reddened noticeably, had a slightly round and pouted look, possibly due to preoccupation, possibly the mark of an ingrowing sullenness.

The girl had boarded the stage at Reserve, eighty miles farther south, and immediately all other passengers in the coach had perked up. Her beauty was, unquestionably, striking—a pale, willowy style of beauty that perfectly complemented her ivory skin and soft, wheat-

colored hair. Her eyes, large and coolly inscrutable, were a delicate and nebulous shade of gray.

She was Miss Gay Rollins—that much Moreland knew, and no more. One of the passengers whose eyes, Moreland noticed, had slantingly studied the girl whenever her attention had been directed elsewhere, had suggested introductions a few miles after she had boarded the stage at Reserve, and in a cool, remote voice she had vouchsafed her name, and thereafter had pointedly indicated her preference to be left alone.

Moreland's glance fell now on the tall, impeccably groomed passenger who had effected the introductions, John Vallance. Vallance wore a suit of black broadcloth, the spotless trousers sharply creased, the black string tie knotted at the exact apex of his starched white collar and flowing down with careless elegance to the stiff bosom of his shirt and the flowered waistcoat under his stylishly cut jacket.

Vallance's eyes were dark and piercing. They belied the wide, rather thin mouth that opened so mobilely into a smile. The black, close-cropped mustache was plainly an adornment designed to relieve the long, rather sharply sculptured face, handsome until, on second appraisal, one became cognizant of its fallow quality and certain deep-seated lines that were the mark either of dissipation or approaching middle age.

Moreland had already put Vallance down as a saloon owner, or possibly a gambler. Of the other two male passengers, who had been as enigmatic and uncommunicative as the girl, he had come to no positive judgement. The one who had gruffly volunteered the name of Eutah Smith, and who appeared to be somewhere in his middle fifties, was a chunky, taciturn individual, with a heavily prognathous jaw and a skin the color of cured leather. Bushy brows screened pale, almost colorless eyes, that somehow seemed hidden and unawakened in a face that remained masked under an habitual stolidity.

The remaining passenger, like Eutah Smith, was stocky, but taller than Smith, with a seamed and gaunted face in which sharp, bright blue eyes were continuously and restlessly in motion. They reminded Moreland of birds' eyes—small and beadlike and quick—and as an accompaniment to their nervous darting, this man, Mike Burla, had a disconcerting habit of twiddling the buttons of his gray corduroy jacket.

The girl Moreland put down as an entertainer of some sort, quite possibly a singer. Her voice had deliberateness and depth, with a faintly husky resonance that fell upon the ear with a sensuous, rather charming quality.

Glancing at her now, he was moved to say suddenly, "If you'd like a glass of cold water,

ma'am, I think there's time for me to go up to the well house here."

She gave him a quick, guarded look. "I'm not thirsty, thank you."

Moreland became conscious of the dark eyes of John Vallance scrutinizing him with a faint, bland smile. Vallance occupied the rear seat, next to the girl. Next to him sat Eutah Smith. Mike Burla was seated next to Moreland, on the front seat.

Long Slim Carnavan came down now from the road ranch and mounted to the box. His long whip cracked like a rifle shot, and the big red coach lurched on its heavy leathers and ground into movement. The passengers sat back stoically.

WAYNE MORELAND was ready now to accept what appeared to be the tacit desire of everyone in the stage for silence; he was the more surprised, then, when John Vallance leaned forward slightly in his seat and remarked, "You're headed for Walapi too, Mr. Boylan? I understand it's quite a thriving little town."

Moreland smiled thinly. "A hotel, six saloons, a livery stable, two mercantiles and a barber shop. Very thriving," he said dryly.

"But I've heard there are some very prosperous ranches in the vicinity. The place will grow, no doubt?"

"I don't think that would be an even money bet," Moreland said. He added, "And it's not particularly important, but the name is Moreland."

The expression of casual interest on the face of John Vallance underwent abrupt change. His dark eyes widened in surprise, almost shock; he leaned forward tensely.

"Moreland?" You're not related by any chance to Neal Moreland, who owned Saber?"

"My father," said Moreland quietly. "You knew him?"

Agitation mounted in the long face of John Vallance. He let the silence bring in a weighted interval before replying, finally.

"Why, yes. I knew Neal Moreland. But it was quite a long time ago." His eyes, veiled now, glanced quickly around the coach, and suddenly Moreland was startled into the realization that the three other passengers were staring at him with a curiously abrupt intensity.

From the seat at his right, Mike Burla's shoe-button eyes flicked at him, like a bird pecking.

A strained tightness crowded his voice as he said, "I heard Neal Moreland was dead. I didn't savvy he had no next of kin."

A vague irritation stung Moreland. "Then you savvied wrong," he retorted with faint belligerence.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Eutah Smith.



Moreland focused his attention on the girl. All her former imperturbability was gone now. Her slim, delicately molded face was stiffened strangely, and her gray eyes were staring at him with a look almost of fright.

He succumbed to his impulse and said, "You seem upset, Miss Rollins. Is something wrong?"

She shook her head quickly—almost too quickly, it seemed to him. "Upset? Of course not," she said in a nettled voice, and in an abrupt, dismissive way, turned her gaze from him.

His glance swung to the faces of the others; he noticed that the eyes of all three were still narrowed on him with a curious, furtive interest.

A cool prickling stung the back of his neck; at the same instant an incredible thought struck him, *They're all concealing something—and not just from me, but from each other!*

Now, Mike Burla, next to him, glanced across to the back seat, at Eutah Smith. Burla's marble-bright eyes plucked at Smith, jerked away. They alighted on John Vallance, and bounded off, finally resting, briefly, on the tight, disturbed face of Gay Rollins.

Burla growled, heavy lids hooding the bird-sharp eyes now, "Seems like we must be all bound for the same town. Walapi's next—and it's the end of the line."

"You regard that as something of a coincidence, perhaps?" John Vallance probed delicately.

Burla grunted. "I don't go in for big words, mister. Plain talk—that's what you'll get from Mike Burla. And if we are all draggin' it for Walapi—" the beady eyes curtly lanced Moreland's guarded gaze and jumped back to Vallance—"well, mebbe we'd better start bein' friendly, if anybody here savvies what I'm talkin' about."

For a lengthening moment, no one spoke, and Moreland sensed a sudden tension on the group, a peculiar and mysterious undercurrent that incongruously seemed to pull them together in some indefinable way, and at the same time, draw them apart.

The smooth, imperturbable voice of John Vallance snapped the tension, finally. "You beat around the bush, my friend. Perhaps you would care to explain that statement."

Burla's glance darted to Eutah Smith's cold, neutral-colored eyes, and for a bare instant, Smith's face seemed to lose its expression of chronic stolidity.

"What about you, Smith?" Burla asked bluntly.

Eutah Smith shrugged. "Better cut the deck a little deeper, *amigo*."

Burla grunted irritably as his brittle eyes crow-hopped to the girl. "Maybe you'd savvy what I'm talkin' about, miss?"

Gay Rollins stiffened. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at mind-reading either," she responded coldly.

"All right," grumbled Burla, his voice pressing down into hard-toned surliness, "I ain't tryin' to rib up nobody, and if you don't hanker to mix the medicine, it ain't no skin off my hide."

John Vallance suggested blandly, "Suppose we haze this talk into more agreeable channels, friend." His dark eyes reached to the girl, who was preoccupiedly smoothing a crease from her green linen skirt. "Do you have any idea what time we arrive in Walapi, Miss Rollins?"

Gay Rollins' head jerked up. She eyed him startledly. "Walapi?" she repeated blankly. "Oh! Why, the letter from Mr. Varnum said—" She checked herself abruptly. "About eleven o'clock, I believe," she finished.

Mike Burla's eyes leaped to her, smug with triumph. "Mr. Varnum, eh? Mr. Harvey Varnum, of Walapi—the lawyer?"

The girl bit her lip and didn't answer and now it was the hard-staring eyes of Wayne Moreland that pressed Burla.

"You know Harvey Varnum?" he asked bluntly.

"Of him," said Burla, sending his quick, smug grin out to the others. "He sent me a letter just like he sent one to Miss Rollins here, and like I got a hunch he sent a couple other people I could name—" his beady eyes shuttled meaningly between John Vallance and Eutah Smith, and his voice sharpened into heavy sarcasm—"except it ain't smart, of course, to git too friendly with strangers."

"You talk too much," growled Eutah Smith, throwing Burla a curt glance.

Wayne Moreland felt the glances of the men and the girl on him again, and again he had the uneasy feeling that all four pairs of eyes were probing him, and at the same time holding back some secret, disturbing knowledge that should be his.

The hot desert wind rustled the curtains of the coach, and the choking dust seeped in and wrapped them in powdery, gray mufflers. The brightness had faded from Gay Rollins' cheeks now, and her pretty face looked weighted with fatigue.

Eutah Smith spoke, his rain-colored eyes settling stolidly on the long, expressionless face of John Vallance.

"You said you knew Neal Moreland, Vallance. So did I, once—a good many years back."

His eyes clung to Vallance, veiled, inscrutable, but Vallance said only, his voice held to a perfunctory urbanity, "Yes, I knew Neal. It was a pity he had to die—right when he was at the top, and ready to get a little pleasure out of life."

Mike Burla's voice sprang at the remark with a savage vehemence. "That's a lie! You're glad Neal Moreland's dead. So am I! He was a tight-fisted, devil-horned son of hell, and I'll call any man a liar who says he wasn't!"

Wayne Moreland felt Burla's vicious, forcing glance on him; felt the acute, expectant tension in the others as he coldly met it. His words shocked them into stunned immobility.

"You must have known Neal Moreland very well," said Wayne Moreland calmly. "I'd like to call you a damned liar, Burla. I'm sorry I can't."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Satan's Legacy

**H**ARVEY VARNUM was out when Wayne Moreland called at his office in the Walapi Mercantile Building, shortly after the stage had pulled up at the Adobe Queen Hotel, an hour late. But young Andrew Hawver, who was reading for law in the office, was at his desk, and gave him the news that the lawyer had already left for Saber.

Moreland went out, a sudden feeling of depression hitting him, now that he was back. Memory of the years that were gone and never could be recalled, rolled back on him with a somber impact, and there was a dull weight in him as he strolled absently up Main Street, towards the Elite Lunchroom. *So he's dead*, Moreland thought, and was not surprised that he should feel pity, but no consuming sense of loss or bereavement. *He's dead, and I wonder if there's a single living soul who gives a tinhorn's damn.*

At the Elite he ate without zest, his thoughts running back to his somber boyhood, to the death of his mother, a victim of his father's insatiable greed for wealth and power. Neal Moreland had been a man who had been compelled to pull himself up by his own bootstraps; a giant, physically, and orphaned at an early age of parents who had gone over the Overland Trail, he had come to the hard-earned conviction that to get much from life, a man had to give much, and Neal Moreland had given it all of his blood and sweat and guts, and finally, as an ironic monument to his blind and consuming ambition, his life. He had also given it his wife, Sarina, a frail Virginia gentlewoman who had finally been smashed against the iron pillars of her husband's terrific lust for material things.

Even as a boy in knee pants, Wayne Moreland had worked from dawn till dark, driven, as all who worked for Neal Moreland were driven, to the point of bitter and frustrated

exhaustion. As a boy, he had accepted; as a young man, he had rebelled. And one rainy night, at a round-up of Neal Moreland's expanding herds, he had challenged his father with hard words, and had himself been challenged with harder ones.

"Dad," Wayne said, "you could have trusted Clint Porteous to post the cocktail guard. Why don't you relax and rest for a change? You're going to burn yourself out if you don't—" he had waved an arm in the rain-splashed darkness—"and then what's all this going to be worth to you?"

Neal Moreland had eyed him darkly from under contracted brows. "What's it worth to me!" he exploded irately. "Why, it's worth a hundred thousand dollars! And some day it will be worth five hundred thousand—hell, a million! Why, this is a cattle empire I've built, Wayne and some day it will be yours. A cattle empire," he repeated sonorously, as if relishing the sound of the phrase. "A true-as-God cattle empire, and I hammered it out with my own two hands—out of nothing!"

"You built it out of men," said Wayne Moreland remorselessly. "Out of men you've ground down and broken and thrown out like old crowbait when you were through with them. Sure, you've got a cattle empire. But what else have you got? Have you got any real friends? Have you got anything besides a bunch of dumb brutes, and a ranch house, and a couple thousand acres of grazing land?"

At that moment, Neal Moreland's gaunt, weather-chiseled face had worn a look of blank shock, of stunned disbelief. He had tramped forward among his sleeping men, standing over Wayne like a dark and menacing colossus, his knobby fingers bunched into a clenched fist.

"By God," he had breathed out at last. "I don't believe it. Wayne Moreland—my own flesh, the flesh I hammered and tempered into a man!"

Wayne had thrown off his soggy soogans and risen, and Neal Moreland had hit him then, had flung that dark juggernaut of a fist at him, and knocked him down. He might have fought back, might have waited for those sledge-hammer fists of Neal Moreland to beat him into insensibility. But it wasn't cowardice that had stayed his hand, it was pity.

So, he had roped his horse, ridden away, and he had not come back. He had not come back until now, now, when Neal Moreland no longer had the power to hurt him, or hurt himself. And after three years away from Saber, three years of aimless wandering as a fiddle-footed grub-liner, he was back—for what? To take over what Neal Moreland had built—to become as Neal Moreland had become?

His pale eyes were set in a vacant stare as



he dropped a silver dollar on the lunch counter and walked out of the Elite. It was nearly one as he started out from Long John Elverson's livery, mounted on a bony buckskin which had been the only horse Elverson had had available for hire.

It struck him as odd, suddenly, that the letter that had come to him at Carson City from Harvey Varnum had been little more than a bald announcement of his father's death; and why should Varnum have to go through the rigamarole of a formal reading of the will at Saber?

It was nearing two o'clock as he rode downward under the high precipice of Sunset Rock and saw Saber in the hazy blue distance. The rambling, story-and-a-half ranch house gleamed whitely in the sharp sun-spray. The huge barn behind it loomed like a gaunt gray monument on its high fieldstone foundation. As a boy, Wayne Moreland had helped his father lay that foundation, toiling with those jagged, heavy rocks until his hands were raw and bloody, until his wiry little body had gone limp with exhaustion. Literally his blood had gone into the building of Saber, as well as Neal Moreland's.

Although Neal Moreland had never spoken much of his past, Wayne Moreland knew that his father had prospected in California at one time; that he had struck hard and savagely at life in many directions. But there were many blank spots in his father's past of which he knew nothing.

Suddenly Wayne Moreland roused from his preoccupation. He was forking the shallow ford of Saber Creek and now, high on the opposite bank, built on a sloping hillside in the shade of a motte of giant cottonwoods, stood the home of his boyhood. He was startled, abruptly, to see the line of horses hitched to the peeled-pole gate of the corral. He counted four, in addition to a span of grays which stood hitched to an empty buckboard. A heaviness rose in him as he reached the corral with the buckskin and dismounted.

**H**IS boots tapped hollowly on the low front gallery. He reached the door and opened it. Voices ran out to him murmuringly from the sitting room, to the right of the cool, low-ceilinged hallway. He started through the white-framed doorway and halted suddenly, staring into the room with a look of blank astonishment.

Four persons sat grouped around the gate-leg table behind which Harvey Varnum stood, a ruddy, portly man who was in the act of opening a narrow manila folder, from which a blue cord dangled loosely. Shock held Wayne Moreland rigid as he recognized the four familiar faces.

Gay Rollins glanced up at him with a

startled jerk of her blonde head. Mike Burla's eyes hit him obliquely, darted away furtively. Eutah Smith's blunt-jawed features showed only their usual cold stolidity, but John Vallance turned fully in his chair and smiled up at him with easy amiability.

"Come in," Vallance murmured dryly. "Join the happy throng."

Moreland stepped tentatively into the familiar, musty-smelling room and realized out of the hollow silence that Harvey Varnum was speaking, staring down at him over his steel-rimmed spectacles with a faint expression of irritability.

"You should have gotten here sooner, Wayne. I—well, it might have saved you some embarrassment."

Grimly, Moreland stared back at him. "I'm here now. If there are legal formalities, you'd better get on with them."

Harvey Varnum tweaked nervously at his round bulb of a nose and glowered briefly at the row of expectant faces before him. He said meagerly, "Very well, Wayne," and opened the folded sheet of foolscap in his hand. He began reading in a flat monotone:

I, Neal Moreland, being of sound mind and sound body, do declare this to be my last will and testament, and do provide for the disposition of my estate, including ranch buildings, land, personal belongings and all my cash resources, as follows, viz.:

1. To John Vallance, gambler and renegade, who fifteen years ago cold-decked me out of a stake of \$4,000 for which I had toiled and sacrificed good years of my life, I do hereby leave and bequeath a full and unentailed quarter-interest of my estate.

2. To Eutah Smith, liar and thief, my old partner in the gold fields who absconded with my share of \$5,000 worth of dust we had gathered from our claim on the Feather River, after months of back-breaking toil, I do hereby leave and bequeath a full and unentailed quarter-interest of my estate.

3. To Mike Burla, killer and outlaw, with whom I associated in the rustling of cattle when down on my luck, and who, after I had broken our partnership, had me sent to Yuma Penitentiary for two years on malicious, perjured evidence, I do hereby leave and bequeath a full and unentailed quarter-interest of my estate.

4. To Gay Rollins, dance hall hussy and daughter of Nancy Rollins, one-time chorus lady in the Rodondo Dance Hall in Custer Junction, who jilted and mortified me by running off with a whiskey drummer after we had been duly affianced, I do hereby leave and bequeath a full and unentailed quarter-interest of my estate.

5. Finally, to my only son, Wayne Moreland, the fruit of my loins and the hope of my heart, I do leave and bequeath as a keepsake of the days when there was fatherly love for him in me, and hope for future years, the little pony saddle bags which I personally

tanned and sewed and pieced together, and which, as a boy, he used as a store place for his childish toys and knick-knacks.

I do solemnly swear this to be a true and honest will, and it is my wish that my estate be disposed of in accordance with its provisions.

(Signed) NEAL MORELAND  
Witnesses: Harvey Varnum, A. Hawver.

A stony silence fell on the room as Harvey Varnum finished his reading and peered at the group before him over the bright crescents of his glasses.

"If there are no questions," he concluded in a dry, precise voice, "I hereby declare this to be the reading of the last will and testament of Neal Moreland, and shall file same for probate in the office of the county clerk."

Abruptly, hard, racking laughter spurted through the room. "Saddle bags!" blurted Mike Burla hoarsely. His bright, shoe-button eyes flashed around at the drained face of Wayne Moreland. "Well, why'n't you go pack 'em, cowboy? We ain't got no openin's here at Saber for grubliners!"

"No!" Gay Rollins was standing, her shoulders tense, her face tight with anger. "I don't want my legacy. It's a mean, shameful, ugly thing, and I won't take it! Give mine to Wayne Moreland." She started making her way out of the room, but at the door Wayne Moreland's tall figure blocked her exit.

"Take it easy," he whispered down at her. "Varnum's talking to you."

"I was only saying," said Harvey Varnum with a look of annoyance, "that you will be compelled to remain in Walapi for possibly several days, Miss Rollins, if you wish to renounce your legacy. I suggest you accept it. It would make it much easier for everyone concerned." His spectacles flashed about the room in a last inquiring sweep. "Now, if there are no further questions—"

"I've got a question, mister!" The voice, flat and angry-toned, came from the doorway, and Wayne Moreland jerked his head with the others.

The tall, rawboned figure of Clint Porteous, his father's old ramrod, stood behind him, spraddle-legged and belligerent.

Harvey Varnum stared at the man, then shrugged with an irritated resignation. "Well?" he snapped. "If you've got a question, ask it!"

Clint Porteous shouldered past Moreland into the room. "Don't worry," he growled, "that's just what I'm aimin' to do. The question is, mister, who do you think you're hoo-rawin' with all this law book faradiddle?"

"Faradiddle!" Harvey Varnum's plump cheeks quivered with indignation. "Sir, if you are implying that this instrument—"

"Nope," interrupted Clint Porteous laconic-

ally, "I ain't implyin' that ain't a true will. That there sure sounds like Neal in one of his sod-pawin' moods, and I reckon it's an honest writin' of what he intended—at the time he drewed it."

A faint alarm sprang into the lawyer's voice. "At the time he drew it!"

Clint Porteous stepped forward belligerently. "That's what I said, mister. And what puts the hair in the butter is, that ain't the last will and testament of Neal Moreland!"

WAYNE MORELAND had been studying the countenances of the prospective legatees as Lawyer Harvey Varnum had sonorously recited the will's provisions, point by point. Only the pale, tired face of Gay Rollins had betrayed shocked and startled amazement. Now, however, there was a unanimity of expression on every face in the room—a look of blank, stunned astonishment.

Harvey Varnum was the first to send words into the shocked silence that had greeted Clint Porteous' announcement.

"You are aware, I trust, of the consequences of perjury, Mr. Porteous?" he said bluntly.

Clint Porteous was a gangling, wiry man, but the shoulders that funneled up like a spread fan from his lean belly were like knotted whipcords, Wayne Moreland knew, and Clint Porteous had never stepped away from a fight in his life.

"You callin' me a liar, Mr. Varnum?" he bit out flatly.

The lawyer's voice thinned into asperity. "I am not here either to impugn your veracity, Mr. Porteous, or to vouch for it. But you understand that a statement such as you have just made must be fully corroborated. Ah—you were a signatory to this alleged later will?"

"I was. And it ain't alleged. Me and Sime Larkin was the witnesses. It was writ out by Neal himself three weeks before he died, and it left me and Sime five thousand apiece." He glanced grimly at Wayne Moreland. "Saber was left to Wayne, here. There wasn't no other bequests."

"I see," murmured Harvey Varnum skeptically. "But Sime Larkin has since died himself, has he not?"

"You tryin' to tell me that makes the will illegal?"

"Not necessarily. But I suggest you let me examine this alleged instrument. If it is a legal testament, it would, of course, contravene any and all previous wills which might be in existence."

Wayne Moreland's attention was drawn abruptly to Mike Burla. Burla was hunched forward tensely in his chair, his beady eyes leveled on Porteous with a glittering fixity.

"Yeah, let's see this fake will!" he barked.



Clint Porteous doggedly shook his head. "I ain't got it," he snapped back with angry frustration. "But it's bound to turn up. That will was drawn. I witnessed it, and I'll take my oath onto it in any court in the state!"

"I am afraid," said Harvey Varnum with pompous condescension, "your oath will be of very little consequence, Mr. Porteous, without the substantiating evidence of the will itself." With a dismissive gesture, he picked up his hat. "That being the case, I wish you all good-day, ladies and gentlemen."

A quick murmur of voices broke in the room as he waddled out. John Vallance, Eutah Smith and Mike Burla had gone into an immediate huddle in a far corner of the room. Gay Rollins remained in her chair, her pale hands toying nervously with an antimacassar. Clint Porteous came over to Neal Moreland. "The boys are out on roundup, Wayne. You want I should bring 'em back and throw these four-flushers out?"

Wayne Moreland sighed. "It wouldn't do any good, Clint. Legally they're your bosses, now. Varnum's right—he can't do a thing unless you can produce this other will. And you say you can't."

"No," Clint Porteous' voice deadened hopelessly. "I've searched the house from top to bottom. The thing's plumb disappeared."

Moreland shrugged tiredly. "Well, I'll drop out to the bunkhouse before I go, Clint. It will be like old times."

Gay Rollins rose abruptly from her chair and walked over to them. "But you're not leaving!" she cried. "You can't! If there is any justice in law—"

"There isn't," Moreland said tersely. "But I'm obliged to you, ma'am, for the way you spoke up for me. Dad would have admired your spunk."

The girl's voice hardened coldly. "I'm afraid I'm not interested in what your father might have admired, Mr. Moreland. Judging by this will I just heard read, Neal Moreland was a crazy man! But as a matter of simple moral right—"

Clint Porteous' voice cut her off harshly. "Neal Moreland wasn't crazy, miss. He was hard and tough and he worked the guts out of a man, but he wasn't crazy, except maybe money-crazy."

Wayne Moreland said, "I'll have to see you later, Clint. There's a few things I'll want to pack."

Moreland looked back at the girl after the foreman had gone out. "I'll show you to a room," he told her. "It's a big house—you can have your pick."

The girl stared at him startledly. "A—room? But I'm not staying here! I couldn't!"

Moreland reminded her, "You're a fourth-part owner of Saber now, Miss Rollins. I

don't cotton much to your partners, but—"

"Just a minute, Moreland!" Mike Burla had left the huddle in the corner of the room and was walking across to them, a certain arrogance, now, in his swaggering stride. He halted before Moreland and said, "I heard you say you was leavin'? How soon?"

Moreland looked down at the man with a faint contempt. "Today, I hope. Tomorrow, perhaps."

"Make it today," Burla said.

"But this is his home!" Gay Rollins cried out impulsively. "You have no right—"

"I say he gets out!" Burla snarled. He wheeled around abruptly. "Vallance! Smith! I say Moreland pulls his freight. The girl says he stays overnight. Wanta vote?"

John Vallance shrugged. "Let him stay. What's the harm?"

Burla exploded, "He'll snoop, that's the harm! I say let's get shut of him, here and now!"

Eutah Smith's mouth opened, closed like a trap snapping shut. "He kin stay."

The fingers of Mike Burla's left hand began agitating the buttons of his jacket. His right hung close to his hip as he stood spraddle-legged, his eyes twitching over Eutah Smith like those of a cat avidly watching a bird.

"I don't want no trouble with you," Burla said sullenly. "I don't want no trouble with nobody. We gotta work together on this."

"Then work with us," Smith snapped.

Wayne Moreland stooped and picked up Gay Rollins' bag, but the girl still hesitated. Moreland saw Mike Burla's glance shuttle rancorously between Vallance and Eutah Smith. Smith's square face was inscrutable. Vallance's dark eyes ignored Burla in favor of the girl. He bowed slightly.

"I trust, Miss Rollins, you can be present with us later for a little conference."

"Perhaps I shall be," Gay Rollins said. She turned silently, and followed Moreland from the room.

"THIS was my mother's room," Moreland said. He placed her shoddy bag on the shelf of a commode and turned. For an instant, the expression on the girl's face startled him. There was a surprised, almost a stricken look in her pale eyes as she stood just within the doorway, staring at the big, comfortable-looking four-poster bed, then at the two large windows, curtained in frilly calico, which gave a view of distant hills and, nearer by, of a tiny creek which ran, murmuringly, almost underneath the window counters.

Moreland smiled. "You like it?"

"Like it! It's—lovely." Her mouth drew down in a sudden pout. "But I'm afraid I'm not used to such luxury."

"You're in a show?" asked Moreland, unthinkingly.

Immediately he realized he had touched a sore spot. She faced him defiantly. "Yes, I'm a showgirl." She paused, then blurted out fiercely, "Maybe there's something wrong in that. Maybe it's a crime to sing in a dance hall!"

"No," said Moreland quietly, "not if you enjoy that kind of a life."

"It's not a question of enjoyment. It's a question of making a living. We weren't all born with silver spoons in our mouths, Mr. Moreland."

Anger, this flash of spirit, made her more beautiful still, Moreland thought. He spoke with a trace of grimness, "I'm afraid if my spoon was ever silver, it's turned to pewter, now." He moved to the door, opened it. "Well, make yourself comfortable. Our grub-wrangler's out with the roundup crew, but if you get hungry, I imagine you'll find the kitchen pretty well supplied."

His brows knitted into a frown as he started down the hall towards his room. This will he had just heard read must be his father's revenge for his desertion of Saber, a bitter and ironic revenge in which Neal Moreland seemed, by some eerie necromancy, to be still directing Saber, from beyond the grave. But what crazy quirk of the brain had caused him to leave the one thing in life he had loved the most, to those he had hated the most?

Abstractedly, Moreland reached the door to his room and thumbed up the latch—at the same instant his breath caught and he came to a rigid halt, one step over the threshold.

The squat figure of Mike Burla was bent over an old, round-topped trunk in the far corner of the room, absorbedly rummaging through its contents.

Moreland's voice hit the silence flatly. "You can get out of here now, Burla. And get out fast."

The lid of the trunk fell with a soft thump as Mike Burla jerked around. For a moment, his nervous eyes were ferally alert and startled; then, striking on Moreland's flat glance, the startled look went out of them and they thinned mockingly.

"Me get out?" he jeered. "Seems like the boot ought to be on the other foot, Moreland. You're the one's trespassin' here, not me."

A tightness ran up into Moreland's chest; smothering anger held his words to a constricted levelness. "I said get out! I'll give you five seconds."

Mike Burla straightened from beside the trunk with a cramped grunt. His beady eyes gave Moreland a quick, studied attention; below his thick, corded neck, his bull-like shoulders dropped forward suddenly. And suddenly, like a bull, he lowered his shaggy-haired head

and drove at Moreland with a charging fury.

Moreland was ready, but he waited until Burla was almost upon him before he sidestepped. Then Burla couldn't stop himself; his momentum carried him on and he crashed into the wall, his arms thrown out in awkward and belated astonishment, and Moreland spun around and clouted him savagely behind the ear.

Burla gasped and wheeled around dazedly. For an instant his thick shoulders were rounded forward and his long hairy arms dangled slackly. Moreland punched at his opened mouth, ripping his lower lip and drawing a bloody smear across his yellow beard.

Burla spat blood and butted Moreland in the belly, sending him back in a wild, driving rush that threw Moreland off balance momentarily, knocking the breath out of him and shooting a hard, spurting pain up through his chest.

Burla followed his attack with a berserk ferocity. He jerked around and jarred Moreland with the bony ridge of his shoulder, and as Moreland stepped back, his collapsed lungs clutching for air, Burla's fist knotted and swished up, aimed for his jaw.

The fist skidded away inches short of its mark as Moreland awkwardly parried the blow on his left elbow. Then, his booted feet bedded solidly again, he came in at Burla with a cold and concentrated fury, smashing him twice in the face and, as Burla staggered back under the onslaught, he plowed a fist into Burla's middle.

Burla's whole face seemed to collapse; breath whistled through his clamped teeth and, as he doubled forward, his shaggy yellow head was a perfect target and Moreland came up on his toes and his right arm curved, struck. The blow was upward, under Burla's bristly chin, and Burla's head snapped back. Then his knees loosened, crumpling under him like rotted stumps.

For a moment after Burla's stocky body had thudded to the floor, Moreland stood over him, trying to pull a deep and steady breath into the cramped void of his lungs.

A voice from behind whirled him around.

"Nice job, Moreland. He was nothing but a wind-belly anyway."

He saw only the gun flashing up in a white, long-fingered hand. It struck behind his left ear. He dropped like a man shot.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Dead Men Tell

MORELAND thought he was dreaming it at first. A damp coolness soothed his forehead, massaging gently. Then he heard crisp, rustling sounds, and his eyes



flickered open. He saw a core of frilly white against a background of pale green. He stared, and the white became a starched blouse, the green a tight little jacket with fancy crocheted buttons. A voice dropped down to him, low and cool and faintly husky.

"Feeling better now?" Gay Rollins asked.

She was bent over him with a basin of water and a tray of damp cloths. The clean sharp smell of witch-hazel bit at his nostrils. He levered himself slowly to a sitting position, then, after taking a moment to let the pain in his head settle, rose to his feet.

He grinned at her and said, "This seems to be a popular room. How did you happen to drop in just at the right moment?"

"I heard Mike Burla and John Vallance talking outside my door. There—there seemed to be something wrong, so as soon as they had gone on, I came here."

They regarded each other through a strained silence. Finally Moreland said, "I found Burla in here searching through my things and had a fight with him. Then somebody else sneaked in and worked me over with a gun barrel." He managed another grin. "That wasn't you, was it?"

The girl didn't smile back. She said in a tight, worried voice, "I think you should go back to town. Perhaps Porteous can find the other will. Then—"

He interrupted her with a shake of the head. "No, I've got to stay here and help Clint, if I can. I might do something. They're after the will of course."

The girl said, "Well, I'm leaving the first thing in the morning." She gave him an urgent glance. "I wish you would take my share."

He looked down at her studiously. "Neal Moreland must have been badly mistaken about your mother—if she was anything like you are."

A shadow darkened the girl's eyes. "Mother was no different from most people—neither all good, nor all bad."

The silence came again, and Moreland had the feeling of a heavy curtain dropping, holding them apart. "You'd better go back to your room now," he said gently, "and get some rest. You look tired. I'm going to see Clint. He may have some kind of an idea about all this."

When she was gone, he went to the closet at the side of the room and opened the door. Hanging forlornly from a wooden peg were the pony saddle bags his father had given him when he was twelve. In spite of his feelings towards Neal Moreland, he felt a reaching pang. Suddenly he was remembering the words Neal Moreland had spoken in presenting him with the gift.

"I'm a man who's lived to be hated by a lot of people, Wayne, but maybe some day

you'll pick up these little saddlebags and wonder if even Neal Moreland didn't have a mite of softness in him—hidden out way down deep."

A knot clutched at Wayne Moreland's throat. Then, abruptly, he reached out, ignoring the saddlebags and taking down a gun-belt and holstered gun from the peg next to it. His face was set with a heavy gravity as he buckled on the holstered gun and walked slowly out of the room.

He was almost to the bunkhouse door when he heard the sound, remote and indistinct, but faintly suggestive of a muffled gunshot. He tensed suddenly as the same sound came again, a subdued and deadened slam, then silence.

A vague foreboding ran through him as the silence lengthened and there was no further disturbance. Abruptly he entered the bunkhouse. It was empty. Then he remembered. The crew would be out on roundup, now. But Clint Porteous had said he would be around. Suddenly Moreland thought of the big hay barn, farther up the hill. He wheeled around from the bunkhouse door and started towards it.

The barn stood weathered and gaunt in its lonely somnolence, and Moreland thought of the time, as a boy, when he had helped his father drag rock for its foundation. The huge front doors were opened and hooked back into their heavy cast-iron catches, but now, remembering those sounds, Moreland detoured cautiously around to the rear where there was a small back door.

An eerie silence filled the great cavern, musty with hay and manure smell, as he stepped inside. Light filtered down dimly through a high rear window; suddenly Moreland started at a muffled, stomping sound. Then he remembered Clint Porteous' old horse, Prince Buck. Buck was a hayburner now, and pensioned off, but Porteous still worshipped the old crowbait. Perhaps—

Moreland moved down the shadowy lane of stalls fronting the high hayloft behind him. Coming to Prince Buck's stall, he halted abruptly, staring down with shock-widened eyes.

Clint Porteous' body lay half in the stall, half out of it, and, bending down, Moreland felt his heart flop over heavily as he saw the dark ugly stain on the back of the foreman's gray cotton shirt. He rolled Porteous over on his back and leaned closer. The foreman was dead. Back-shot, here in the barn. Moreland's jaw knotted. This would account for the shot. *But he had heard two shots!* And so far as he could determine, Clint Porteous' life had been extinguished with a single bullet.

Puzzledly, he straightened, his pale eyes reconnoitering. They moved in a slow and thoughtful stare to the opened front doors.

The ambusher, whoever he was, evidently had followed Porteous into the barn and had shot him while he was feeding Prince Buck. But why?

The answer flashed back to him startlingly. Clint Porteous, alive, was a threat to the heirs under the first will. And he had admitted he hadn't known where the will had been secreted. He was safer, then, out of the way!

Heavily Moreland started towards the opened doors. Three stalls beyond Buck's, where the darkness laid deep pools of shadow across the splintery floor, he stumbled over an object that looked like a pair of rolled soogans dropped in the barn aisle. But as he stooped, his breath caught and his heart struck up at his chest like a leisurely thudding mallet. Mike Burla's eyes, in death, still appeared small and beadlike, but now they looked straight up with a stiff, staring vacancy. Porteous dead. And now Burla!

Moreland bent closer over the stocky figure and saw where the bullet had gone—a dead center shot, through the thorax. This, then, accounted for that second shot he had heard. But who had killed Burla? Not Porteous, for the ramrod had worn no gun. Had Burla crept up behind Porteous and killed him, only to be shot, himself, by some stalking ambusher as stealthy and deadly as himself?

But why Burla? Moreland's brow furrowed. He was starting to straighten when he heard the soft footfall and, jerking around, saw a shadowy figure silhouetted dimly in the big doorway. The shot slammed instantly, and the bullet whistled into the dark cavity of the barn, grazing along the ridge of his left shoulder and dazing him momentarily.

He dropped to his knees, jerked out his Colt. He fired, but the light was poor and he saw the dark figure wheel clumsily and break into an awkward running gait. Cautiously he moved to the opened doors, his gun up, ready. Nobody was there.

But now Wayne Moreland knew one grim and inescapable fact. He was next on the killer's list!

A PRETERNATURAL silence seemed to surround the house as Moreland entered it by the back door. At the door to his room, he hesitated. Lamplight was spraying out from the crack under Gay Rollins' door and he went on to it and knocked. Only silence answered his knuckles against the panel.

He opened the door and walked in. The room was deserted.

Across from the girl's room, and his own, were two other bedrooms and, on a sudden impulse, he picked up the lighted lamp that stood on the commode and went out into the hall again. He opened the door of the first

bedroom, holding the lamp high. Abrupt shock hit him. The room was a shambles—pillows and mattresses slit, bureau drawers ransacked, everything topsy-turvy.

A bitter anger pounded through him as he turned and went out. He entered the next room, across from his own, and here it was the same.

Returning to Gay Rollins' room, he replaced the lamp on the commode and went back into the hallway. In his own room, he found the lamp and lighted it. Now his own room was in the same condition as those others—pillows ripped, mattress shredded, drawers torn out and overturned. A sickness close to nausea came up in his throat. To these kind of people, Neal Moreland had left Saber! Again the unanswerable question hammered back at him—*why?*

Presently he sat down and took time to roll and light a cigarette. Why hadn't they searched the girl's room? Were they laying some kind of a trap for her?

He rose suddenly. *I've got to talk to her again*, he thought with abrupt alarm.

A moment later, passing her room on his way to the living room, he came to a quick stop, his head cocked back tensely. Faint sounds came from behind the girl's closed door. Gay Rollins must have come back.

He put his hand up to knock, then impulsively checked the movement. Suppose it wasn't Gay Rollins in there? Suppose it was one of the others, taking advantage of her absence to search the room?

Deliberately his hand dropped to the door latch, thumbed it up. He pushed the door gently inward. A tall, black-coated figure was bent over the big mahogany bureau in the far corner of the room, stealthily pulling out a drawer.

Moreland's hand dropped to his gun. He said softly, "Any luck, Vallance?" and now there was neither grace nor aplomb in the gambler's knee-jerking spin.

His eyes barely had time to lose their look of frozen panic. Glass crashed and the gun's detonation tore the silence in the room. Moreland saw the panic on John Vallance's long face change to blank bewilderment. The gambler took a step like a man testing icy mountain water before a dive. Then suddenly he clutched at his belly and pitched forward, sprawling at Moreland's feet.

Moreland crouched and blew out the lamp. A dryness tightened in his throat as he crept to the window and cautiously drew back the curtain. There was no sound—the silence was so utter it seemed to vibrate like the tiny pulse beating now in Moreland's temple.

He pulled in a cramped breath. And suddenly, like a shaft of sunlight belatedly piercing the dark crevices of his mind, the appalling



truth flashed home to him. He knew now why Neal Moreland, sparked by anger and bitterness towards his son, had drawn that first will in the way he had. *To John Vallance, gambler and renegade . . . To Eutah Smith, liar and thief . . . To Mike Burla, killer and outlaw . . .* This was Neal Moreland's ironic vengeance—to leave Saber to a greedy crew of wastrels and cutthroats, who, he had known, would inevitably fight among themselves and ultimately destroy each other!

But even in the heat of harsh and bitter anger, Neal Moreland's last thought had been of him, Wayne. *To my only son, the hope of my heart. . . .*

Abruptly Moreland tensed. *The pony saddle bags!* Excitement gripped him as he turned and catfooted swiftly to the door. Reaching his room, he went directly to the closet and opened the door. A rotted strap snapped as Moreland pulled the saddle bags off their peg. His eyes misted as he stared down at the writing burned into one of the pouches—  
WAYNE MORELAND, FROM HIS FATHER.

He unclasped the buckles and opened the faded pouches. From one he took out his boy's collection of Indian arrowheads; a peewee's nest that crumpled to dust at his touch; a toy wooden pistol hand-whittled for him by Clint Porteous. His hand dipped into the other, came out empty.

Hope abruptly died in him.

*And that's all,* he thought starkly. *It was a loco idea anyway. . . .*

He stared away dully, the bags resting across his knees. He remembered now how Clint had joshed him when he had first strapped the bags to the saddle of his little pony, Dancer. "Secret dispatches for the gen'ral, hey, Wayne? Well, see you don't git skelped."

Secret dispatches! Now he remembered! At the bottom of one of the pouches his father had left a false bottom, with a narrow strip of leather built in concealingly over the top of it. The snaps holding the strip in place had been sewn in deftly out of sight, in the deep corners of the bag.

Trembling, his fingers probed downward again, found one of the hooks and unfastened it. He pulled out an envelope wrapped carefully in a protective oilskin case. Written on the envelope in the familiar jabbing scrawl of Neal Moreland were the words: "My Last Will & Testament—Neal Moreland."

Inside, bearing the date March 11, 1872—postdating the will Moreland had heard read that afternoon by almost a year—was a sheet of ordinary ruled stationery. This, too, was in Neal Moreland's sprawling handwriting. A dry hardness crawled up in Moreland's throat as he read.

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This is my Last Will & Testament, which shall rule out any and all previous wills made by me.

To my son, Wayne Moreland, I leave Saber Ranch and all my property, real and personal, except for two bequests.

I leave the sum of \$5000 to my foreman, Clint Porteous, and \$5000 to my strawboss, Sime Larkin. These men helped me start Saber as a little three-up outfit, and stood by me to the finish.

Knowing the end is near, I declare it my wish to be buried on Saber Ranch, and I ask that my son forgive me my trespasses, and erect a small marker to my memory.

NEAL MORELAND.

Witnessed by: Clinton V. Porteous  
Simon Larkin

WITH fingers that shook slightly, Wayne Moreland was tucking the folded sheet back into the oilskin wrapper when a soft knock on the door jerked him abruptly back to alertness.

He thrust the packet into the pocket of his shirt and quickly drew his Colt.

"Who is it?" he called sharply.

An urgent voice answered, "Gay Rollins! Please! I must see you—right away."

He went to the door, jerked it open suddenly, the gun still in his hand.

The girl's face was drawn and tense in the pale shaft of light from the room lamp.

"You—you're all right?" she stammered in sudden embarrassment. "I was out front—in the living room. I thought I heard a shot. I didn't know—" Her voice fell away in a shaky whisper, and Moreland drew her into the room.

"You'd better sit down," he urged gently.

"When I went to your room a little while ago, you were gone. Later I went back and heard someone in there, rummaging around. It was John Vallance."

"Vallance!" The girl's face paled. "Why, he came to my door just a few minutes ago. He said Eutah Smith wanted to see me in the living room. I went to the front of the house, but Smith wasn't there. I waited. Then—then I heard that sound—like a shot. I suppose it was a trick, to get me out of my room. I—"

"It was a trick, all right." Moreland's voice thinned grimly. "A double trick, performed by Eutah Smith. Vallance is dead. So are Mike Burla and Clint Porteous. I've got to get you out of here, Miss Rollins. Tonight—right now."

"Vallance—Burla?" The girl gave him a dazed stare. "You—you mean that Eutah Smith—"

"That's right," Moreland cut her off flatly. "Smith decided to play a little game of all-or-nothing. He sent Burla out to ambush Clint

Porteous. Burla got Porteous, all right, but Smith got Burla. He also nearly got me—under the impression, I think, that I was John Vallance. I believe he'd rather have me alive than dead—he'll say I went gun-crazy after hearing that will read." His glance speared the girl. "I'm afraid if you don't—" He checked himself abruptly, seeing the sudden shock stiffen Gay Rollins' soft gray eyes.

"You mean—I might be next?"

Moreland's jaw clamped. "There's not going to be any next. You and I are fogging it for Walapi—right now. I've got a little package to deliver to Harvey Varnum." He hesitated, then said, "I found the missing will."

The look of wan fatigue in the girl's face faded momentarily. "Thank God!" she breathed fervently. "That makes me feel cleaner, somehow. Before, I felt—"

Moreland interrupted her gently, "Dad softened up, before he died. I think he would have felt differently about you, knowing you." He hesitated again and the words jounced out of him awkwardly. "I do."

For a moment, he thought her gray, aloof eyes showed a brief responsiveness. Instantly they were shadowed again, enigmatic. She said with an edge of bitterness, "No doubt I should be humbly grateful for that."

Moreland was conscious of an angry hurt swelling in his throat. "I'll get one of mother's old shawls for you," he offered abruptly. "It will cover up that white blouse."

Out in the shadowy front yard, he helped her into the buckboard, a feeling of nervous urgency prodding him. The reins were wound around the whipstock. He was bent over, fumbling to unwind them, when the voice whipped down at him from the front gallery.

"Stand tracked, Moreland! Turn around slow and keep your hands in sight."

Moreland froze, his hands poised at the whipstock. From the buckboard seat he heard Gay Rollins cry out to him faintly, a thin fragment of sound that seemed washed away as his right hand grabbed at the buggy whip. Jerking it out the stock, he slashed at the horses. The startled beasts lunged in the traces and he saw Gay Rollins' head jerk back under the buckboard's leaping start. He threw himself flat just as the shot slammed.

He saw the angry spurt of flame in the darkness, for an instant saw Eutah Smith's spade-shaped jaw lighted in the ghastly illumination of the powder ash. He fired, heard window glass smash, fall tinklingly. Abruptly, he leaped to his feet and started running. Twenty yards from the end of the gallery was a large clump of azalea bushes. He raced towards them.

Smith's gun blared twice, and he felt a hot burst of pain flame up to his shoulder. Again Smith fired twice.

Moreland felt his left knee jerk out, felt himself falling. He staggered one more step, the smashed knee wobbling like a loose piston under him. It gave way. Sharp-edged twigs gouged his face as he pitched down. Choking, he spat out dirt. He had fallen into the azaleas.

**T**HERE was a deliberate, marching tread of boots across the gallery, then silence. He started crawling, his smashed leg dragging behind him uselessly. He reached a heavy stand of buck brush and stopped, feeling violently sick.

He could hear a faint rustling now and lay tense, trying to get bearings on the sound. It ceased suddenly.

Then Eutah Smith's voice beat at him startlingly out of the remote darkness.

"You ain't got a chance, Moreland! Better show yourself. Drop your gun and I won't shoot."

Moreland waited grimly. After a moment the faint rustling of brush came again, and now the sound was closer. He heard Smith cursing matter-of-factly and the voice seemed to be off to the right of him somewhere. He took a knife from his pocket and began to whittle at a thick limb of brush. The limb parted with a faint snap. He held his breath.

The pain in his arm and leg hit down into his belly now and turned him sick. He gritted his teeth and pulled off his coat. The pain became a dull, steady throbbing. He fastened the collar of the coat to the end of the stick. He groped around, then, until his hand touched a small rock. He picked it up and hurled it.

For a moment there was no sound. Then the sharp crackling of brush came again, sounding much closer. Smith apparently sensed, now, that he was near his quarry, and was becoming wary. Moreland's mouth twisted grimly. He threw another stone, heard it land, with a faint thud, fifteen yards from where he lay.

Now rigid, he held out the long stick, with the coat dangling from it.

Gun flame lashed out of the darkness and the coat puffed back. Moreland let it drop. He saw Eutah Smith's blocky frame build into a thick, ominous shadow, twenty yards away. He waited, teeth set hard. He sucked in a pained breath.

Smith came bumbling on in the darkness, and Moreland waited patiently until the bulky figure was thirty feet from him. He aimed low, fired.

He heard Smith's startled bellow fill the night, and then Smith was running at him like a crazy man, firing in stark panic, the bullets driving into the ground where the coat had fallen.



len. Moreland half raised himself, when Smith was only ten feet from him, and clamped the fingers of his left hand around his limp right wrist. His finger steadied on the trigger. He squeezed it.

Eutah Smith wheeled clumsily. Moreland could hear his hoarse gasping, could see the gun in his hand, wobbling crazily. Then Smith seemed to be falling, but as his blocky shadow hurtled down, one more gout of flame leaped at Moreland and he felt a hard blow against his collarbone, knocking him back.

He was conscious of sudden, utter silence. He felt queerly light-headed suddenly, as if he were swimming out into dark, warm buoyancy. Then the darkness swooped down on him, engulfing him totally.

HE WAS in his own bed, at Saber, when he recovered consciousness, and for a moment the two faces peering down at him seemed like vague, fuzzy patches of gray against the sharp morning sunlight. He peered back, and the patches seemed to spread, to take on definition. Slowly, they became the faces of Gay Rollins and Dr. Brand Logan, of Walapi.

Logan's crisp blue eyes twinkled down at him. "Feelin' better, son? But you still look a mite peaked, for a tough-gutted Moreland."

Moreland's glance shuttled between the doctor and the pale, tight-set face of Gay Rollins.

"This—my nurse?"

Logan grinned. "You're gonna need one for about a month. She ain't satisfactory, maybe I can git Lydia Peckham, from Fox's Corners."

Moreland grimaced, and Brand Logan picked up his little black satchel. "Feed him light for a couple days, Miss Rollins—broth, maybe a poached egg now and then. I'll look in again tomorrow."

The girl's voice caressed Moreland's ears. "Don't worry, Doctor. I'll be here—for as long as he needs me."

He heard Logan's footfalls dying in the hallway. He looked up. Gay Rollins' face was above him again. He said, "That could be a long time, Gay."

She said, "The doctor said a month."

Moreland grunted. "Logan don't know all that's wrong with me. Maybe you've noticed some other symptoms." He reached out, gripped her hand. "Have you?"

She flushed. "Maybe—Wayne."

"Gay, you could get me up out of this bed quicker than Logan could."

"Could I? How?"

"Like this." He pulled her down to him. Her lips trembled, close to his. Then, with a sudden little cry, she was in his arms, and he knew he was home to stay. He closed his eyes. He felt he could sleep now—sleep and dream. And he knew the dream would be about Gay Rollins, and that when he woke up, he would find it had come true.

## — NOT SO GAY BLADE

THE bowie knife was invented by James Bowie, frontiersman, pirate, slave trader, filibuster, scout and one of the heroes of the Alamo. Born in Logan County, Kentucky, or Burke County, Georgia—it's still a moot question—Bowie arrived in Louisiana with his parents in 1802. He became a well known and popular figure in New Orleans.

With brothers Resin and Jack, Bowie joined forces with Jean Lafitte, the colorful and notorious pirate of the Gulf of Mexico and the steaming Louisiana bayous. The Bowie brothers soon amassed a small fortune in smuggling slaves into the Bayou State at \$1.00 per pound.

It was at Natchez in '27 that he brought the still famous knife into being. He was one of a large group of men who accompanied Dr. Maddox and Sam Walker to the "field of honor" on a sandbar out in the river. Each duelist had a large number of backers in the group. The duelists exchanged two shots each, all misses.

Feeling ran high. A small riot ensued in

which six were killed and fifteen wounded. Bowie had brought along a crude knife which he had fashioned out of a blacksmith's rasp. He was shot early in the fracas, but despite his wound brought down and killed one man with his improvised knife. When the bloody melee had ended the survivors expressed considerable interest in Bowie's knife. He sent it along to a cutlery firm in Philadelphia with instructions for shaping and honing. Thus was born the knife which attained wide use and popularity throughout the West and later the entire country.

Bowie knives varied in length. The average ran fifteen inches from tip to hilt's end. The blade's top was straight and flat, curved outward as it neared the tip. The blade's cutting edge curved inward as it arched up to the tip.

Bowie died at the Alamo in 1836, but his knife, still a favorite among outdoorsmen, lives on—a deathless monument to one of the West's greatest heroes and scouts.

J. W. Q.

# TALES of the

by LEE



## The Prophet's Rebellion

WITH SETTLERS DOTTING THE PRAIRIES AND THE INDIANS CONFINED TO RESERVATIONS, PEACE SEEMED TO HAVE SETTLED OVER THE OLD WEST.

BUT ON THE CROW RESERVATION IN MONTANA, UNREST SEETHED AS WRAPS-UP-HIS-TAIL, A RENEGADE MEDICINE MAN, PREACHED REVOLT FROM A STRONGHOLD IN THE BIG HORN MTS.

PROMISING HIS HUNGRY FOLLOWERS MEAT, HE LED THEM OUT INTO A FREAK THUNDERSTORM. NEAR THE AGENCY THEY FOUND A FREIGHTER WHOSE 8-OX TEAM HAD BEEN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING, AND THE BRAVES FEASTED.

CONSULTING HIS "BIG MEDICINE," WRAPS-UP-HIS-TAIL PROPHESIED HARM TO THE AGENT. SOON WORD CAME HE'D BEEN CRIPPLED IN A RUNAWAY.



THE CROWS GREW MORE RESTLESS.

A CAVALRY SQUADRON WITH 2 HOTCHKISS GUNS ARRIVED. THE PROPHET SAID THE GUNS WOULD BE DESTROYED. SURE ENOUGH, DURING TARGET PRACTICE ONE BLEW UP. HE PROPHESIED THE SOLDIERS WOULD BE WIPED OUT AND A STORM SWEEPED DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINS FLATTENING THEIR TENTS.



# "OLD" WEST



**T**HE CROWS BELIEVED WHEN HE PROMISED TO BLIND THE INTRUDERS, MAKE THEIR BULLETS HARMLESS, THEN CUT OFF THEIR HEADS WITH A SINGLE BLOW.

**S**UMMONED TO SURRENDER, WRAPS-UP-HIS-TAIL CAME IN ANNOUNCING HE WOULD DESTROY THE WHITE MEN AND FREE HIS PEOPLE.

**T**HE CROWS, GUNS UNDER THEIR BLANKETS, WATCHED EXPECTANTLY FROM ACROSS THE LITTLE BIG HORN WHILE THEIR PROPHET, BRANDISHING A GREAT RED SWORD, RODE AT THE LINE OF CAVALRY DRAWN UP BEFORE THE AGENCY.

**W**HEN HE FLUNG A MAGIC POWDER AT THEM THE SOLDIERS FIRED A VOLLEY OVER HIS HEAD. A FRIGHTENED PONY BOLTED, THE PROPHET SHOT ITS RIDER. THE CAVALRY CHARGED.

**I**NSTEAD OF LOPPING OFF THEIR HEADS, WRAPS-UP-HIS-TAIL FLED FOR THE RIVER. A SHELL BURST UNDER HIS HORSE. HE LEAPED OFF UNINJURED & PLUNGED INTO THE SWIFT CURRENT.



**A**T THAT POINT AN INDIAN POLICEMAN DREW HIS REVOLVER AND SHOT THE MEDICINE MAN THROUGH THE HEART. HE FLUNG UP HIS ARMS, DISAPPEARED, AND THE AMAZING PROPHET'S REBELLION WAS OVER.

39-122

# DEEP-LIKE A III GRAVE III

HE WAS a sleek, well fed man standing on the edge of the Brewster Hotel veranda, a benign contentment showing in his shallow eyes and smooth shaven jaws. The morning air felt teasing good to his lungs; no lawman or newly fleeced victim was looking for him. Already his stay in Brewster was longer than any stop he had previously made, and still he could turn his back without apprehensive expectation of bullet or knife steel. He could walk the street and know friendly greetings. He had become Honest Slim Keith, gentleman gambler.

A light whiff of breeze twisted down the river of dust that marked the single street of Brewster. A cone of haze whirled up and went dancing away toward the chaparral flats below town. A rider reined aside to avoid the dust-devil, and the gambler watched the man without change of expression. But a hard glint of dislike had flared in his shallow eyes.

"Hot today, Freddie," the gambler called out as the rider came abreast the Brewster Hotel.

"That's right, Mr. Keith," the man answered.

A brief grin split Freddie's dark features. Freddie Watts was a stolid, weathered rancher, young, yet weighted and sobered by the incessant struggle to build his small holdings into a paying thing. The contrast between the two men was the contrast between brilliance and shadow, sharp, immediate—and important to the scheming of Honest Slim Keith.

"Felicia come down yet?" Freddie Watts asked.

The gambler shook his head, not answering. Both men sought favor of Felicia Mason, both had their dreams, their secret plans of winning her. And so far, both were in the running.

"They tell me," the gambler said with maliced suavity, "that you had some hard luck the other day, Freddie."

Anger flared close to the surface in the other's face. "Some skunk dropped half a dozen poisoned salt blocks around Soda Springs," he said tightly. "A man who'd poison cattle—"

The gambler grinned untellingly. His plans were deeper than would show, their ramifications stretching far. Two years ago he had dropped off the stage as Honest Slim, scheming how to verify and support the appellation,

allowing himself to lose, grinning down the greed in his heart and giving generously of his winnings. No more the tin horn. Not that his control over the cards wasn't all it ever had been. It was. But he was working for roots in the town, a permanent standing as a citizen.

"Tell Felicia howdy for me," Freddie Watts said. "I've got to get back."

"I will," the gambler said. He watched as the young cowman rode on up the street and reined in at Mooney's hardware store. The dislike was again brittle and ugly in his eyes and then he was turning, hat in hand, as light heels clacked across the hotel veranda.

FELICIA MASON was tall, almost too tall by comparative standards of beauty, but few men were aware of the fact until she stood before them, eye to eye. Honey-gold hair lay thick across her shoulders in school-girlish curls; her gray eyes held poise, reserve and warmth—and a directness that seemed to eat into a man's thoughts and unsettle him. None of it unsettled the gambler.

"My new rig should be in today," he announced casually. "A phaeton. I want you to honor it by sharing the first ride with me."

Felicia Mason was pleased. Honest Slim Keith saw that he had impressed her. It was a strong point in his suit, this casual acceptance of money.

"Is that Freddie Watts' horse there in front of the hardware store?" the woman asked.

The gambler nodded. "It is."

While they stood watching, a stoop-shouldered, age-bowed old man shambled out of the store and shuffled along the walk toward the hotel. Honest Slim Keith's lips tightened.

"Mr. Keith, could I talk to ye? It's mighty important."

The gambler eyed the old man for a moment without answering. Felicia Mason smiled and turned toward him, trapping him, forcing him to laugh his feigned good-nature and stride down the steps.

"I need more powder, Mr. Keith," the old man said. "And maybe a bait o' grub." He kept his head down as though ashamed to be asking. Then he straightened and looked the gambler in the eye. "She's lookin' mighty promising, Mr. Keith," he whispered conspiratorially. "That ol' mine is gonna make us both millions."





"Mr. Keith!" Freddie Watts yelled, flinging himself backward into the shadow. "For God's sake, man!"

Honest Slim Keith scarcely listened as he counted a handful of bills into the old man's calloused palm. Old Hardrock had been almost his sole error—and extravagance—since he'd hit Brewster. Honest Slim Keith had cleaned the old prospector, fleeced him down until the old man had scribbled out a quit-claim deed to his latest gold mine. It, too, had ended up on Keith's side of the table. Loud laughter from the onlookers had tipped him off that he'd just won a dry-hole, and in the interests of his newly founded reputation, Honest Slim Keith had tossed the deed back to the old miner, giving him something to go on.

But pride was a solid core in Hardrock's old frame. He'd take the mine only by openly de-

*Honest Slim Keith earned his monicker—although it took him until the day he died to do it!*

III

By  
**AL STORM**

claring Honest Slim Keith as his full partner, Hardrock to furnish the work and mine-savvy, Keith the grubstake and the hole. And so it had been through the long months; at first a joke, a generous gesture on Honest Slim Keith's part, but powder took money and Hardrock ate as though constitutionally hollow, and the joke had become a rancoring sore spot.

Still, Felicia Mason's smile, as the gambler returned to her on the veranda, was his reward. They watched the old miner hobble back toward Mooney's Hardware store.

"He's too old to be scrambling around these hills," the gambler said. "He'd only end up—"

The thought sprang full bloom—a way to end the continual demands for money, for powder, for a "bait o' grub," and he fell silent, hugging the idea. The woman's voice cut short his contemplation.

"Excuse me, Mr. Keith, I want to talk to Freddie."

She was gone, then, moving down the steps and along the walk toward the hardware store to where Freddie Watts was strapping a bundle behind his saddle. The gambler watched, his fingers gripping an unlit cigar until the tobacco shredded and broke. Turning, he looked out over the chaparral flats toward the blue haze of hills. The spice was gone from the morning. He cursed beneath his breath and threw the cigar into the street.

The day formed into a blazing arch of heat, riving the town, driving man and beast alike to shade. The wind lifted a veil of fine sand that sifted like powder across the saloon fronts, scratching incessantly against window glass.

Keith toyed with his drink in the Golden Slipper, impatience, rage building and fermenting beneath the amiability he displayed for the bartenders. For two years he had lived in Brewster, every breath and gesture calculated for its designed effect. For a year he had known Felicia Mason, figured her in his plans, shaped them slowly and deftly about her until he had placed himself into equal running with Freddie Watts. But there it stopped.

He tossed off the drink with a quick jerk of his head. The ugliness grew hard and virulent within him and he walked out the door.

The sun had dropped into frothy clouds to the west, soaking the town in glaring ruddy light. He stopped, searching the street with unconscious caution that two years hadn't changed. Across the street, in Matt Dineen's General Store, Felicia Mason was standing in the doorway. He tipped his hat. She smiled. He stared at her boldly for a moment.

THE phaeton did not arrive. Hank Deever's freight wagons were still somewhere on the road, and the gambler turned away from the freight office with a

mounting sense of frustration. He had planned heavily on the show he'd make with its expensiveness, its red enameled wheels and hand-rubbed mahogany chassis.

He apologized to Felicia and she laughed it off so lightly he felt the anger again swell tight in his chest. The night came down and spattered Brewster with pools of yellow lamp-light. Horsemen drifted into the streets from the dusty out-country. Noise lifted along the walks. Big Ed Shurlesky and Angle Meadows sought him out for a high-stake game.

Honest Slim Keith played mechanically, his thoughts edged with bitterness. The play whipsawed back and forth, both big-time ranchers playing it close, Honest Slim Keith riding his luck and his knowledge of cards without fervor.

"That Freddie Watts is a comer, Angle," Big Ed Shurlesky said after an hour or so of play. "He's got the foundation of a cattle ranch that will be one some day."

Angle Meadows nodded. "A good man, Freddie."

The gambler said nothing. Coming from Shurlesky and Meadows, such praise was tantamount to a golden future.

"He'll be on top the pile come round-up time this fall," Big Ed continued slowly.

The gambler stared, stony-eyed, at his cards, the big rancher's praise eating deep into his vitals. He yielded to anger rather than temptation when he palmed a card and took Big Ed Shurlesky for a sizable pot. He stacked a ringer that left Angle Meadows tight-jawed and grim as the gambler raked in the chips.

Lulled by the gambler's reputation for honesty, both ranchers fought hard, but Honest Slim Keith stacked and palmed with cold delight, until the game broke up.

"Another night, Keith," Big Ed Shurlesky rumbled. "You're too fast for me tonight."

A friendly drink at the bar and the two ranchers headed out into the night. Honest Slim stood alone, musing. He felt oddly lonesome, hemmed in. The men's praise of Freddie Watts kept ringing in his head, worrying him.

"I just saw your new buggy, Mr. Keith," a voice put in at his elbow. "They're puttin' it together over at the freight depot."

Keith turned slowly to face Freddie Watts. "I was thinking of giving it to Felicia," Honest Slim Keith said, searching hopefully for the man's wince. "The best is none too good for a woman like her."

Freddie Watts looked down and began fumbling for tobacco and papers to roll a cigarette. The gambler smiled. He led the young cowman over to a table and called for whiskey, the best in the house. He offered Freddie Watts a cigar, and the other grinned.

"I'd like to make some big money for a



change instead of working my fool head off for pennies, Mr. Keith."

Honest Slim Keith stared reflectively, tapped his fingers on the table top, let his lips form soundless words.

"You're a friend of mine, Freddie," he said finally. "You're a friend of Felicia's. I might be able to help you."

A quick light sprang into the rancher's eyes, and Honest Slim Keith sipped slowly of his drink.

"I've a gold mine—" he began, and the light went out in Freddie Watts' eyes. He grinned again.

"You mean ol' Hardrock's dry-hole?"

Honest Slim Keith smiled secretively. "That hasn't been a dry-hole for some time," he whispered sagely. "I've all the money I need, and I like Brewster as it is, not as a hell-roaring mining camp. We might make a deal."

Freddie Watts listened, suspicious but unwilling to distrust Honest Slim Keith. A few more drinks, a little more talk, and they made a trade. Honest Slim Keith called for paper and ink. The transaction was written and witnessed.

"If in thirty days you're not satisfied, we'll trade back," the gambler said. He put it in writing.

The tight knot of anger was gone. Honest Slim Keith glowed with reassurance. In thirty days a lot could happen to a ranch. Freddie Watts would find out that he had been duped, but by then Honest Slim Keith would have shown his ineptness for ranching by ruining the little spread. They'd trade back. It fitted

in with the scheme that ran deep beneath the surface of Honest Slim's generosity.

Doubt was returning to Freddie Watts' features. "I don't know anything about mining, Mr. Keith," he said slowly. "What do I—"

"Neither do I," Honest Slim Keith admitted. "Hardrock handles it for me. Now that you're the owner, he'll work for you."

Freddie Watts nodded dubiously. "I'll see him in the morning and ask him about it," he said.

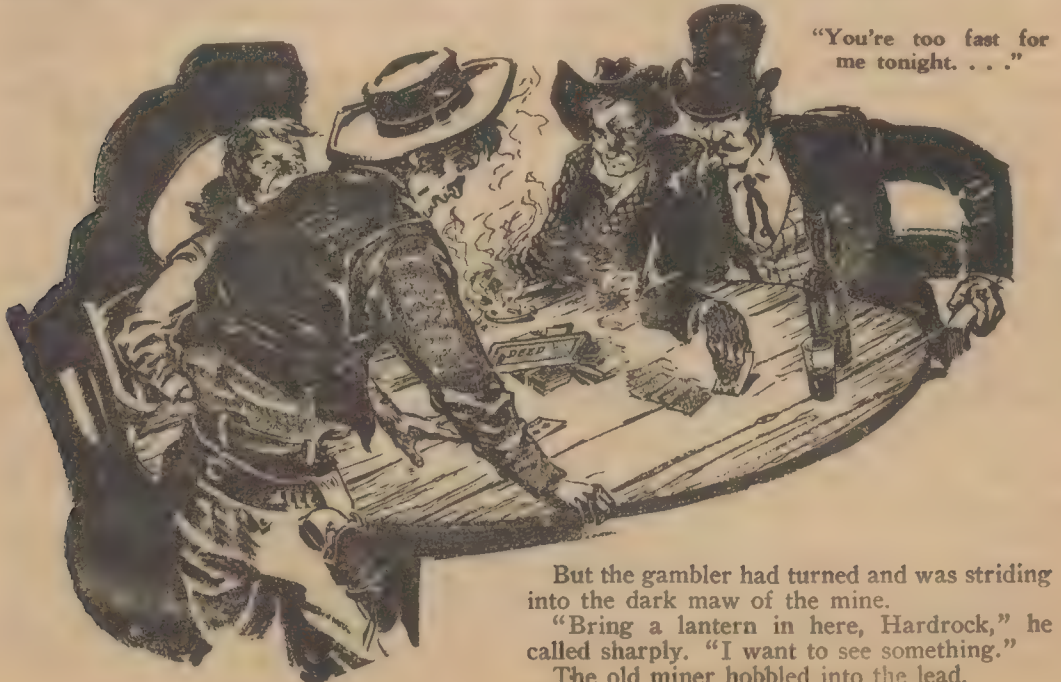
The gambler stood toying with the idea long after Freddie Watts had gone. Freddie Watts was planning on talking with Hardrock in the morning, and Hardrock was a miner. Suppose Hardrock confided to the cowman that the mine was a worthless hole in the rock? Freddie Watts would take the old miner's word for it; he might not wait thirty days to be dissatisfied with his bargain.

THE moon was low against the bleached blue sky when Honest Slim Keith came in sight of the tailings dump. He rode openly up to Hardrock's clapboard shack and dismounted. A dry cottony taste was in his mouth, nerves twitched across the backs of his hands. He stood for a moment drinking deeply from a whiskey bottle.

"Get up, Hardrock, and get your clothes on," Honest Slim Keith said.

Hardrock batted his reddened eyes blearily. He began dressing.

"I was figurin' on comin' in to see you tomorrow," he said. "I was fixin'—"



But the gambler had turned and was striding into the dark maw of the mine.

"Bring a lantern in here, Hardrock," he called sharply. "I want to see something."

The old miner hobbled into the lead.

"You'll sure be mighty surprised, Mr.—"

Hardrock never finished what he had been saying. A two-pound lump of tailings rock smashed his skull and stretched him dead in the sudden blackness of the mine. The lantern was smashed. Honest Slim Keith stood listening, his breath beating against his throat. The silence pushed against him. His heart was a thumping cacophony in his ears and he fled the mine, eager for the open night and the trail toward town.

Freddie Watts brought Hardrock's body into Brewster. He was taut-faced when he sought out Honest Slim Keith.

"Felicia is mad about us tradin'," he said shortly. "She called me several kinds of a fool. I don't reckon I played so smart."

"Then show her, Freddie," Honest Slim Keith advised. "Get in there and show her what raw gold can buy."

Freddie Watts looked doubtful. "With Hardrock gone—"

The gambler nodded soberly. "That's right. We'll have to give our old partner the best funeral money can buy." After a few moments, he added brightly. "And then you get yourself some powder and get in there and work. Show her what's what."

"And maybe get a lump of rock droppin' down on my head like Hardrock did?" Freddie Watts finished.

The gambler reared back and stared at the cowman until Freddie Watts flushed and dropped his eyes.

Freddie Watts' jaw squared. He said nothing, but the gambler could see the determination working him. Honest Slim Keith smiled faintly and sipped his drink. He had called every turn, had mapped every move. His schemes were working perfectly.

The sun was bright. He felt heady with triumph, magnanimous.

"I'll drive Felicia out this afternoon and we'll try setting a charge," he said. "I've always meant to try mining myself."

The chance was too good to miss. The gleaming phaeton with its high-headed team minced up the trail before the mine shortly before sun-set. Felicia Mason's face was set, her smile mechanical and chill as she looked at the crude shack, the raw stone of the trailings dump. Freddie Watts met them bleakly, his features set and unhappy.

"Struck it rich yet?" The gambler climbed down and handed down Felicia Mason. The stones were rough, sharp underfoot, and Honest Slim Keith turned to her. "Maybe you'd rather stay here. There isn't much to see about a mine, and these rocks will ruin your slippers."

Freddie Watts watched in glum silence as the gambler carefully assisted Felicia back into the plush-cushioned phaeton. He turned

abruptly and strode toward the mine entrance, the gambler at his shoulder, talking glibly, laughing, taking delight in seeing the misery of the young man's mien.

At the far end of the shaft Freddie Watts climbed over a huge pile of shattered rock. The air was thick with powder fumes and rock dust.

"You blew one, hey?" the gambler laughed. He looked around curiously. He'd never been this far into a mine before.

Freddie Watts picked up a long string of fuse. "Wouldn't be so bad if only a man could see the sun," he said. "And there's plenty of gold, I guess."

Honest Slim Keith stiffened slightly, peering at the man through the flickering lantern light. But Freddie Watts was digging a match out of his pocket. Gold! The gambler looked more closely at the rock shards underfoot. Dark veins wavered through them, twisted and merged and grew thick.

"Come on, Mr. Keith," Freddie Watts said. "I guess you'll want to—"

But Honest Slim Keith had dropped to his knees. Gold—flecking the stone, was laughing at him. Laughing because he'd traded a gold mine for a two-bit cattle spread, laughing because the showy phaeton outside would be shoddy compared to what Freddie Watts would buy.

The gambler slid his hand under his vest and drew the short barreled revolver.

"Come on, Mr. Keith!"

He fired twice, feverishly. No sound would escape the mine tunnel; no man would know that Freddie Watts hadn't been caught by a powder blast. He'd fix that. He was Honest Slim Keith, people would believe him when he babbled his story. Men would be sorry for Freddie Watts, but they would believe.

"Mr. Keith!" Freddie Watts yelled. The gambler's slugs screeched from the rock wall and the cowman flung himself backward into the shadow. "For God's sake, man!"

Honest Slim Keith reared upright, his gambler's traditional poise forgotten. He fired again as Freddie Watts yelled at him.

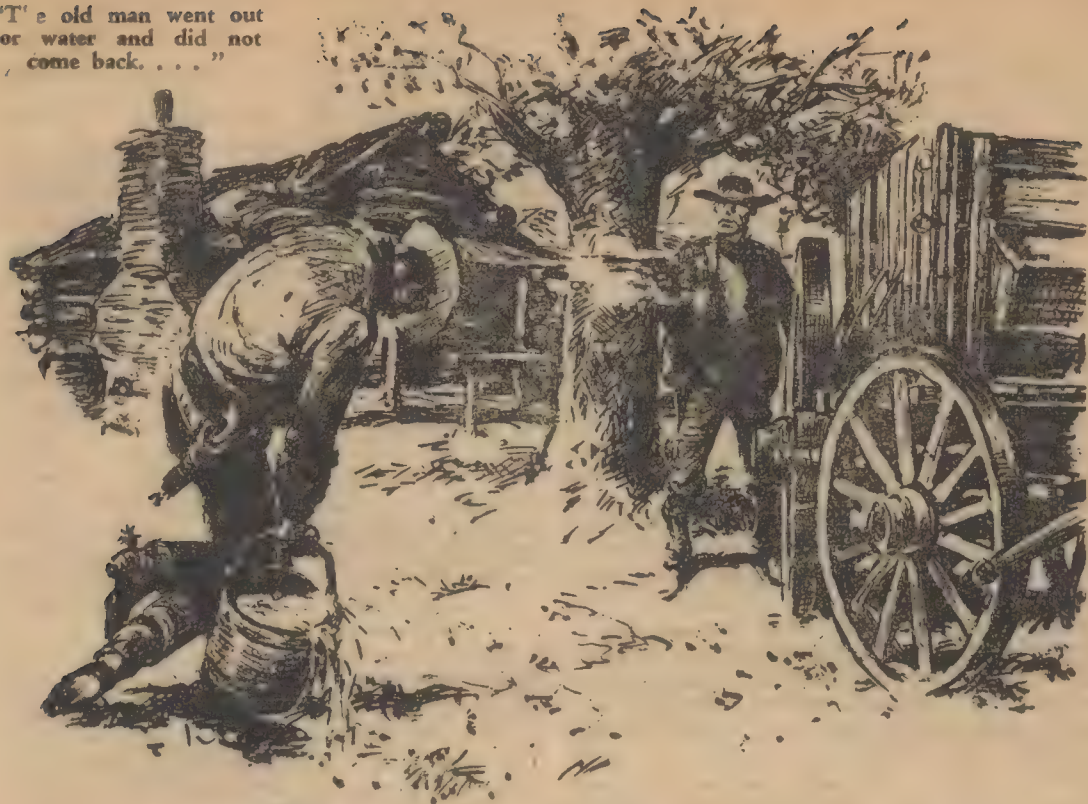
Some inkling of the man's yelling began to penetrate the gambler's mind. "... fuse is lit, Mr. Keith!" Freddie Watts was saying.

Honest Slim Keith turned toward the blank face of the shaft end, turned in time to see a whirling gout of brilliance rise out, sweep up, catch him and suck him deep into the crimson light.

He was there when Freddie Watts edged cautiously into the dust-haze with another lantern. He was there, twisted and broken, half buried in the clutter of rock, his blood twisting and seeping with the twisting veins of gold, devious and deep beneath the surface—like the plans of some men.



"The old man went out  
for water and did not  
come back. . . ."



# BADLANDS BARGAIN

*Second  
Part of Four:  
Cattle Kate*

*"It's day all day in the day time  
And there is no night in Creede...."*

*—Cy Warman*

PAT CASSIDY was 30 years of age in May, 1886, and, according to Charles Kelly, George LeRoy Parker was born in 1867, so the latter was about 23 years old when he rode into Pat's outlaw game. Parker had been doing a man's work eight years, and had outlaw friends, though his participation in their activities is not so clear.

The two Cassidys supplied the Wyoming towns fully with beef, graduating out of the local, small-bunch beef steal and slaughter traffic into shippers. This meant sending beef by train to the markets of Kansas City, Omaha, Chicago, with wholesale raiding and

dangerous risks of discovery by ranchers and cattle association riders. It meant, too, need of a rendezvous where cattle could be held within reach of railroad sidings.

The ranch was Cattle Kate's. In 1883, a rancher by the name of Maxwell took a train-load of cattle from his ranch on Sand Creek in Carbon County, Wyoming, to Chicago. Having sold his beef, in the way of ranchers in a Chicago variety theater, he found an

**By RAYMOND S. SPEARS**

attractive young woman who came from a small Michigan town. Her name was Catherine, and she shrewdly listened to Maxwell's suit, recognizing the chance of a lifetime. She married the Wyoming rancher and returned with him to the open range outfit. Maxwell was in the big beef money, and he gave his wife a free hand.

She built a shooting gallery, a bowling alley, a gymnasium, and not only the Maxwell riders but passersby hung their hats and joined in the frolics, boxing, wrestling, fencing, dancing contests. Mrs. Maxwell imported fighting bulldogs, game chickens, horses and refereed the games. By precept and example, she persuaded the men, especially the youngsters, to practice athletics, greatly improving their stamina.

Mrs. Maxwell's innovations were striking and surprising, but not always improvements. Thus soon after her arrival in Wyoming, her black mare, Magdalene, dusted Arapahoe Flying Spot, owned by the Arapahoe chief, Sharp Nose himself. The Indians lost everything but their brass nose rings, as the contemporary account says. Though Indians commonly accepted defeat with good grace, they claimed foul play and declared war against the white squaw winner. The Maxwell crowd killed three braves and afterwards the Indians sought revenge by killing several white settlers when on their way back to their reservation.

In 1886, the cattle business suffered a periodic panic of low prices, bad weather and overgrazing. Maxwell had taken to drink, and his wife took over his affairs. She made Tom Mason, a gambler who turned cowhand, a handsome fellow, foreman. When he fell in love with his employer, his affection was not resented. Presently Maxwell died suddenly and friends even then said he was "put out of the way."

However that may be, the Maxwell ranch prospered under Kate Maxwell's management, shipping cattle and making money, while far and wide other ranches suffered setbacks in lost cows. When a Mexican insulted Mrs. Maxwell, she impulsively shot him, and thus Juan Medino became a victim of "justifiable homicide." Next a ranch rider, Frank Eckles, in trying to explain a miscue, inadvertently called her "Katie," instead of Mrs. Maxwell, according to ranch etiquette. With a quick draw, she shot the rider through the shoulder, but in quick remorse nursed him back to health, with a handsome apology.

The open range heard the Maxwell ranch was "right." Pat Cassidy brought Powder river cows there, grazing them for railroad, mine and cowtown meat markets. The Maxwell riders had much money, and spent it in gambling and liquor. Mrs. Maxwell was

called "Cattle Kate" and was called the "first brains" of the rustlers.

Cattle Kate rode into Cheyenne with her crew and while the boys went spurring, she rode horseback afternoons, cut a swell figure in hotel festivities, lavished tips. When a gambler tipped a bid for her from the sidewalk, she rode him down, lashed him with her quirt and he escaped, his face welted, through a saloon into an alley.

Her riders accused the Beesemer gambling house of cheating them. She ordered the proprietors, Failey & Boden, to return their money, and when they refused, they were lucky to escape from Cheyenne to Salt Lake City. The \$9,000 thus recovered was used to throw a party at the Maxwell outfit. Excess drinking was usually frowned on down there, but now a "big time relaxation" was had. Thus gradually the Maxwell ranch became notorious and in February, 1889, Ben Westphal killed Jack Cooper over a "maverick" in a duel—thus betraying the cattle game there.

Mrs. Maxwell was described as a tall, erect, darkly handsome woman with striking profile and attractive disposition, though she smiled seldom and maintained her dignity in town. Her eyes were dark and sharp, her hands large and strong, her feet small, and she wore "a half pint of diamonds, dressed richly." Despite her poise she was just a bit loud. "Speaking grammatically, she played the piano, sang and danced, sewed prettily—but had few boarding school accomplishments."

From the Maxwell ranch the Cassidys shipped rustled cattle by rail eastward, to beef fences on the Missouri River and Lake Michigan. A fair warning appeared in the St. Louis Democrat in February, 1889, a news item saying the condition was becoming intolerable to cattle men. As a woman was involved, the cattle barons restrained their wrath.

Then James Averill (Averal, Averel, etc.), a Down East college man appeared, writing letters to newspapers telling where and how certain great land-claimants obtained their lands. He named frauds, killers, and who ran legitimate homesteaders off their claims. Easterners, posing as "sportsmen" were exposed as land thieves, and Jim Averill was damned. Cattle Kate used him, the word was, and consultations were had with lawyers, prosecutors, detectives, land officers, killers for hire, sheriffs, politicians, wise ones in an effort to find ways and means of breaking up the Cattle-Kate-Rustler-Averill combine. Hanging somebody would teach the outlaws and blabbers a lesson. About this time Butch Cassidy came down the line with a trail herd.

"Where's Pat?" Cattle Kate asked Butch. "They got him with another man's horse," Butch answered, "they headed him up a creek



west of the Big Horns, and stretched him in his own hondo noose. Somebody must have told, for it wasn't just a happen-so hanging. It was organized. Better watch around, Mrs. Maxwell."

"Call me Kate!" she smiled. "Don't you know me well enough?"

"I'm sure grateful for your kindness!" he exclaimed, coloring up, and she knew he was. Butch never took advantage, never presumed, never forgot himself—and Cattle Kate wasn't common, promiscuous, but a right choosy queen of the range. With Pat Cassidy gone, Butch was his successor.

Cassidy was cautious, trusting few, and when he finished a transaction, he rode the night alone, keeping in the clear. Cattle Kate showed him the worn clipping from the St. Louis paper, date line February 27, 1889, warning her and the rustlers of impatience.

"Averill's writing letters isn't bravery," Butch said, "It's just Down East ignorance!"

**A**VERILL took a homestead and a wandering wastrel girl became his housekeeper. Ella Watson was a gay, good-natured minx, and cowboys brought her calf mavericks or quarters of beef, and when a stranger rode up, he found Ella had a bunch of cows of her own. On July 20, 1889, six ranchers of the region and that stranger drove up in a wagon. The stranger thought Ella was Cattle Kate. The posse barged in and seized Averill. A 14-year-old boy, Gene Crowder, saw the raid and rode, a Paul Revere of the open range.

Averill and Ella put up a fight but were overpowered. Averill demanded to see the warrant; to this A. H. Bothwell flourished his revolver, saying, "Here's our warrant! You've stolen all my calves you're going to!"

Later Bothwell declared fifty calves of his were inside Averill's fence, and the seven men declared John Durbin, a church-going large land-holder, turned the calves out. When the girl broke away, Bob Connor whose land titles Averill had investigated and Ernest McLain, another rancher, caught her.

"We're taking you to Rawlins!" Bothwell shouted, as the team was reined southward through the rough country, and all hands were jeered by the two prisoners. The raiders afterwards claimed the captives argued and fought for miles, and to quiet the woman, whose shrill voice tormented them, they threatened to drown her.

"Why, the river hasn't enough water to wash your dirty hides!" the woman mocked.

The stream trickle confirmed the woman's jibe. Up the Spring Canyon cottonwoods loomed. The raiders had made a mistake taking the two without legal warrant, and the jeers infuriated them. No jury had convicted

a homesteader in scores of cases. If Averill and the woman brought suit, forced a trial before a homesteader jury and a political judge? Suddenly, after trading glances, the seven captors seized the two and dragged them across the dry spring bed to one of the cottonwoods.

Lariat nooses were roped around their necks, standing ropes were thrown over limbs, and men holding the two let go and sprang to heave-ho on the haul ends, and thus the two were hoisted up. The seven men watched Wyoming's first muckraker and his housekeeper slowly strangle, whirling and throwing themselves about in weakening convulsions, their bare faces contorted, their death agonies as terrible a spectacle as was ever seen in the grim West. Never would one of the guilty spectators again know peace of mind, day or night, drunk or not.

Frank Buchanan, a homesteader, fairwarned by the Crowder boy, came riding to the scene as the seven rode away with the wagon, and he began to shoot. John Durbin was hit in the thigh, and the posse turned and blasted away at Buchanan with their long range rifles. Buchanan had to turn back, but got word to Casper, fifty miles distant that the expected range war had begun, and a woman had been lynched. A band of homesteaders rode to the scene and, finding the bodies, left them dangling for all comers to see.

"They hung a woman!" the cry went up, and Cheyenne heard that the vivacious and noted Cattle Kate Maxwell had been hanged because she harbored rustlers, giving her pastures to feed stolen cows. The Cheyenne local correspondent reported that Cattle Kate had been lynched, and thus the wastrel of the pasture plains and red desert became magnified in tradition and folklore.

"They said Averill's housekeeper had fifty calves!" homesteaders jeered. "Why, she never had nothing but mavericks or a canner—maybe!"

The detective who mistook Ella Watson for the range queen was hurried from the region, to vanish an unsung blunderer. The six local lynchers were arrested. Whatever sympathy the cattle barons had over the lost profits—if any—was gone when the woman was lynched. All the great land thieves were thrown on the defensive. Prosecutors, federal and local courts, Washington authorities had to be placated.

They even sent a "big fellow" to President Cleveland with \$200,000 cash, and when the rancher left it on the president's desk, the contemptuous head of the nation asked, "Haven't you forgotten something? Take it!"

When word of the woman's lynching came, the real Cattle Kate Maxwell simply gathered

her jewels, loose assets and a satchel of clothes, fled and was heard of no more. The Carbon County authorities stalled along when the grand jury sat, three months later. Gene Crowder had died suddenly; Buchanan, Ralph Cole and other vital witnesses had disappeared. No indictments were found, not because no offense had been committed but because no witnesses were around to testify.

The lynchers escaped—to their own consciences and the ostracism of their fellows.

Public sentiment was outraged. Thousands of homesteaders flocked in to settle on government lands, and the cattle barons numbered only a few hundred. The great herds wearing the land-grabbers' brands were now systematically bled. The talk of law was absurd where convictions were impossible against homesteaders. Land stealing, lynch law, and scandal came with red hands to court. However, utter lawlessness was intolerable and neutral citizens sought real justice.

The outlaws, with Butch Cassidy leading, took advantage of public opinion against the cattle barons whose hope of profits, even expenses, vanished in starved herds on overcrowded pastures, in beef buyer combines, and in blizzard kills. The cattle thieves took their pick. Cattle men borrowed from banks at 10 per cent or 12 per cent interest; the banks borrowed from the eastern financiers and insurance companies; thus, the cattle war kept going till the money was shut off in the far spread panic of 1893.

Butch Cassidy and his outlaw band raided the range, not only through the Powder River country, but through Nebraska, Idaho, up in Montana, down into Colorado and Utah. The news from the Wild West fascinated bored men of wealth and youths eager for rough, exciting life of hunting elk and grizzlies, and living in a lawless land and sharing the recklessness of the outlaws and the famed lawmen. There was the "land of the free." In no two regions were conditions alike—mine towns, cowtowns, homestead centers, railroad divisions rivaled one another, and each community had its own attractions and opportunities.

**A**MONG the men who joined the rush to kill big game in Wyoming was Robert Ray Hamilton, a descendant of Alexander Hamilton. When his so-called "Fifth Avenue" friends in New York disapproved of his marriage, he went to Jackson's Hole, just south of Yellowstone Park, and took up a ranch, in the late 1880's, when horse thieves were running horses both ways over Trail Creek Pass and most of his neighbors were outlaws. Hamilton was a good sport and was on good terms with all of them.

One morning Hamilton rode out to kill an

elk for fresh meat. He did not return, and on September 15, 1890, a news dispatch from Helena, Montana, came to New York newspapers that the society man had been drowned in Snake river, in Jackson's Hole. His wife said she believed the dispatch was a fake, and that it covered Hamilton's ruse to be rid of her by feigning his own death.

Charles A. Dana and Chester S. Lord, of *The New York Sun*, sent a reporter, John R. Spears, to verify the news; with dental, physical, other data for identification, the reporter arrived in Rexburg, Idaho, the nearest approach to the Grand Teton country in which Jackson's Hole lay.

The good people of Idaho warned my father that his life would be forfeit if he went among the outlaws beyond Trail Creek Pass. "They'd kill you for ten dollars," he was told.

The manager of Hamilton's ranch sent word to the reporter, "You're talking about digging up Hamilton's body. Don't do it. Mind your own business or get shot!"

Of course, a reporter fulfils his assignment. Spears went to the county seat of Uintah, Wyoming, swore out an information that to the best of his knowledge and belief, Robert Ray Hamilton had been murdered. Then he engaged Coroner Code and four deputy sheriffs, bought five 45-90 Winchester rifles and five 38-40 Colt revolvers, and ammunition. The reporter from New York was an Annapolis Naval Academy man, and he was a shade less than 6' 3" tall, and of the five who carried guns he was the smallest. They hired horses and a wagon at Rexburg and drove over the Teton Basin, through Trail Creek Pass into Jackson's Hole. On the way they stopped at a tall, lone pine tree which had cleats nailed up the trunk to the branches and near the top had a comfortable resting place. This tree was the look-out from which the Cassidy horse thieves could see west across Teton Basin and warn in advance of the dust of an Idaho sheriff's posse.

Jackson, who named the Hole, was a fugitive. For many years the valley had been occupied by horse thieves. Only a score of men were living there in 1890, but Rexburgers said they were all desperate citizens.

I met in all fifteen citizens of Jackson's Hole (the reporter wrote). They had fenced in claims, built log houses, and reared small bunches of cattle. Of these, all but two, if one may judge by the looks and conversations, were as good citizens as can be found in any frontier community. They looked the stranger square in the eye. They did not hesitate to talk about their antecedents and adventures before they came to Jackson's Hole. More than that, they were making homes.

Of the two, one was a braggart at whom



neighbors laughed contemptuously and the other was simply a young man who had a restless eye and bearing that the rest did not like. The worst that could be said of the community was that one of the citizens had been convicted of stealing a horse a couple of years before and been sent to the penitentiary. I never found in any community so great a proportion of companionable men as I did in Jackson's Hole, the place from which I was told it was doubtful whether I could come alive. This fact leaves the suspicion the Idaho people may somewhat enjoy telling terrifying stories to tenderfeet.

At that time the outlaws "owned" Jackson's Hole. Among those genial, companionable, square-looking citizens were several of the most successful horse thieves and cattle rustlers the West ever knew. The "small bunches of cattle," the horses, had been stolen. The *Sun* reporter heard remarks about Butch Cassidy, including details about the taking of stolen stock through Trail Creek Pass. However, he wasn't able to get the facts for a story. The truth was, the men who gave the hints about Cassidy were making sure they were not talking to a detective instead of a newspaper man.

The body in the rough pine board box was that of Hamilton. The ranch manager stood back, watching the posse dig up the bones and identify the teeth, the heal of the broken leg, and other characteristics of the man who had been flung over his horse's head into Snake river eel grass. His spurs had been tangled in the long blades, and the scion of a famed family had drowned in the outlaw fastness. That was the whole story.

Butch Cassidy's next encounter with law was in Rock Springs. He was accused of taking advantage of a man who was sleeping off liquor in an alley and was held for several days. The accusation was a laugh, considering Cassidy's ability. Obviously, this was a sly attack intended to disgrace a cattle rustler and a horse thief who couldn't be convicted in any Wyoming court because the petit jurors were bound to acquit any one accused of raiding the stock of the great ranches.

The charge fairwarned Cassidy against the resourcefulness of his enemies, who merely suspected his importance in the open-range underworld.

The KC, or Kaysee ranch was the rendezvous for the rustlers. West of this ranch in the Big Horn Mountains was a pass and because of its appearance against the sky, it was called the "Hole-in-the-Wall" and over the summit, down the grade beyond, the outlaws built cabins and shacks until they had seven structures. Beyond, in the wild fastnesses was pasturage for thousands of cows and of this grass the outlaws took advantage,

bringing stolen animals over the divide and, after reworking the brands, hiding them till the burns healed.

The old whoop-hurrah days of running off whole herds had not ceased, but most of the Cassidy take was picked beef, steers drifted away from their brands, commonly by homestead men and boys and hidden for the collectors. A new member came to the gang—Kid Curry, alias Harvey Logan, whose brother, John Logan, had been killed by a rancher in the Little Rockies, and who had become an outlaw when Pike Landusky accused him of stealing a calf which Logan claimed he had raised himself, when he found it a maverick without a mother cow.

Another recruit was Harry Longabaugh (Longbow, etc.), known as the Sundance Kid, who had been charged with horse stealing when he was 17 years of age, riding a horse he vowed he had raised from a colt. Youngsters in search of adventure and easy money became contributors to the shipping herds, and despite the increasing anger and activities of the cattle barons and their associations in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Nevada, by 1890 more than 450 "active members" of Cassidy's band were counted, and more than a thousand homesteads were used by the outlaws for pasturing "drift beef" and as local accommodations on their restless rounds. And on the Kaysee, Nate Champion and Nick Ray kept open house for the crowd. The Kaysee outfit was nearly opposite the Hole-in-the-Wall of the Big Horn Mountains.

**T**HOUSANDS of prime beef steers were run off. Calves were mavericked and branded with homestead "petty larceny" insignia. With the cattle vanished also fancy saddle stock horses, imported from Kentucky and the East by the sports and ranchers. Horses grew big in Montana and Wyoming, and Texas and the Southwest grew mustangs which were descended from the Moores Arabians, brought in through Mexico by the Spaniards. The theft of horses and the rustling of cattle led to hundreds of arrests and more than 400 cases of beef theft were taken into Johnson and neighboring county courts in Wyoming.

The accused demanded jury trials and only two convictions were obtained. The victims of horse and stock thieves were unable to obtain conviction of the thieves because their own hands were not clean. The cattle barons and private preserve makers organized an association and listed 125 men as rustlers. They decided to handle the thieves with force, and they sent to Texas for gunmen. A score responded to the \$5 a day and found and were brought to Casper, Wyoming, by private car, at night.

A score of cattle barons, a number of sportsmen, a young Englishman, two Harvard graduates, a roundup of state officials, a legislator, and hired hands rode forth on horses, wagons, buckboards, with supplies which included many quarts of strong liquor, with chasers, per man. Thus began the most famous raid ever undertaken against cattle rustlers and horse thieves in the wild and woolly West.

The posse timed their ride to the Kaysee outfit, to arrive at midnight. The man-hunters surrounded the place and at dawn when two ranch visitors went for water they did not return, Nick Ray went out to see what became of them. Without warning fire opened on him, and he fell, bushwhacked. Crawling toward the cabin, he was hit again.

Nate Champion dragged Ray to cover at risk of his life and, despite demands that he surrender, elected to fight it out rather than be strangled. Few fights against hopeless odds have more stirred the West than Champion's.

During the desperate day, Nate Champion wrote the account of the fight which is a classic of its kind. The account here given is "Champion's Diary Complete," printed a few weeks after the incident; heretofore only fragments of Champion's diary made during the fight that day have been published. We give it below in full:

Me and Nick Ray was getting breakfast when the attack took place. Two men here with us—Bill Jones and another man. The old man went after water and did not come back. His friend went out to see what was the matter and he did not come back. Nick started out and I told him to look out, that I thought there was some one at the stable and would not let them come back. Nick is shot but not dead yet, he is awful sick. I must go and wait on him. It is now about two hours since the first shot. Nick is still alive, they are still shooting, and are all around the house. Boys, there is bullets coming in like hail. Them fellows is in such shape I can't get at them. They are shooting from the stable and river and back of the house. Nick is dead, he died about 9 o'clock. I see smoke down at the stable. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time.

It is now about noon. There is some at the stable yet; they are throwing a rope out at the door and dragging it back. I guess it is to draw me out. I wish that duck would get further so I can get a shot at him. Boys, I don't know what they have done with them two fellows that staid here last night. Boys, I feel pretty lonesome just now. I wish there was some one here with me so we could watch all sides at once. They may fool around until I get a good shot before they leave. It's about 3 o'clock now. There was

a man with a buckboard and one on horseback just passed. They fired on them as they went by. I don't know if they killed them or not. I seen lots of men come out on horses on the other side of the river and take after them. (This was Jack Flagg and his stepson) I shot at the man in the stable just now don't know if I got any or not. I must go back out again. It don't look as if there is much show of my getting away. I see twelve or fifteen men. One looks like (name scratched out). I don't know whether it is or not. I hope they did not catch them fellows that run over the bridge towards Smith's. They are shooting at the house now. If I had a pair of glasses I believe I would know some of those men. They are coming back. I've got to look out.

Well, they have just got through shelling the house again like hail. I heard them splitting wood. I guess they are going to fire the house tonight. I think I will make a break when night comes if I live. Shooting again, I think they will fire the house this time. It is not night yet. The house is all fired. Good bye, boys, if I never see you again.

Nathan D. Champion.

When the body was searched at first, the story was overlooked. Then it was discovered. A bullet had gone through the paper. Who saved the account is not recorded. Several versions were copied far and wide. The man recognized was hidden by marking out the name, and minor differences appeared in copies, but the above was made from the original, saved by a rancher.

The passersby were Jack Flagg, on horseback, and his stepson (or nephew), on the buckboard. They heard the firing and saw the smoke puffs of combat, recognized their import, and lashed their horses into a run. The Texas killers, cattle barons and Eastern sports opened fire on them. Flagg, galloping beside the buckboard called, "Hay, Kid—the rifle!" Getting it, he said, "Tell the folks!"

Then Flagg stopped and when the pursuers came in range, turned loose. The odds were a score to one, but the lynchers scattered, ducking to cover. Flagg kept them down till the boy was in the clear and then rode himself to help spread the alarm. Thus, on April 9, 1892, the Flaggs warned the homesteaders and small ranchers that the land-grabbers and sports had come to clean them out.

Plowmen, wildcrafters, nesters and outlaws, from shacks, camps, cabins and ranch outfits men and boys rode to the scene with their "meat rifles"—dozens, scores and presently hundreds of them.

Homesteaders, the despised pothunters, plowmen and hoemen, with Tom O'Day, the Logans, Harry Longabaugh and probably Butch Cassidy, came from far and near, but they found two men had been killed and the



Kaysee outfit a smouldering ruin, a wagon loaded with hay having been pushed against the cabin and fired.

The mob of sports and ranchers shackled along toward Buffalo, forty-seven miles distant, where "the rustlers and plowmen" had their headquarters. They feared the homesteaders would escape as had the man and boy, but shots began to come from the hills and washes and the great ranch owners, sportsmen and their hired gunmen were driven into the TA outfit on Crazy Woman Fork, surrounded and besieged as mercilessly as they had attacked the Kaysee.

At last the rustlers and settlers had faced the land-grabbers with the odds of 10 to 1.

First of all, the horses of the men who had come raiding were killed where they were held in the TA corral. As the animals were knocked down, the cattlemen and sports realized what the besiegers were intending. They were determined to hold and "get" the men cornered in the ranch, and killing the horses insured that the raiders couldn't make a dash and escape in the night that was coming. For the first time the cattle barons and sports realized that they faced heavy odds and that the homesteaders and desperadoes were not going to run from them.

That night a messenger was sent through the scattered line of besiegers to appeal to Sheriff Angus to come to the rescue. Sheriff Angus was already on the scene with a posse of twelve deputies, and he ordered the ranchers and sportsmen to surrender in the name of the law, submitting to arrest on the charge of murdering Nick Ray and Nate Champion. Angus refused compromise.

It was at this time that Cy Warman, most rollicking of the Western poets, wrote one of his most famous and colorful verses, including:

*Here's a land where all are equal,  
Of high or lowly birth,  
A land where men make millions  
Dug from the dreary earth,  
Here the meek and mild-eyed burros  
On mineral mountains feed,  
It's day all day in the day time  
And there is no night in Creede.*

Singing Cy Warman's songs, the homesteaders waged their civil war in Johnson

County and, while the figures are uncertain, some twenty-seven men died in the chase and battle. The authorities of Johnson County, of course, were in sympathy with the great majority of the residents. They refused to consider anything but unconditional surrender of the hired killers and their sporting employers and commanders.

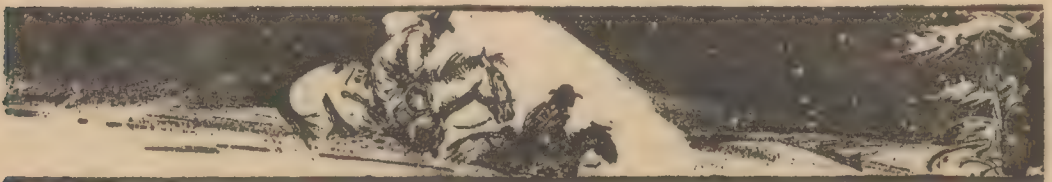
A messenger wormed out in the dark and reached Col. Van Horn at Ft. McKinney, who with three companies of militia was on guard against Indian uprisings. The colonel refused to participate in the local affair. Then state authorities appealed to President Harrison to save the important citizens from being lynched by the homesteaders and range outlaws the raiders had started out to kill or hang. The Army was sent to the rescue. The raiders were taken prisoners and conveyed to their stronghold in Cheyenne. There Willis Vandevanter, an able attorney, saw all the prisoners released on \$20,000 bail, each, a million or so in cash securities being put up. The hired killers fled in the night in curtained pullmans.

The avenging sportsmen and cattlemen were indicted and brought to court. More than a thousand talesmen were interrogated in the effort to get a trial jury, but every one had such strong opinions that a fair trial seemed unlikely. Accordingly the cases against the accused were *nolle prosequed*. The authorities, seeing the pass to which outlawry had come, gave notice in June, 1892, that lawlessness must cease.

The killings, violence, robberies, thefts, raids, feuds and the famed desperadoes bothered nice people. The arrival of unnumbered boys and youngsters, looking to participate in the wild occasions attracted wide-spread attention to the "delinquents." Among the latter was Elza Lay, alias Bob McGinnis, reputed to be a son of a famed old family. He came to the Hole-in-the-Wall and became Butch Cassidy's pal.

Heavy rewards offered for the arrest and conviction of Butch Cassidy forced the leader to scout low. But the real attack on the cattle rustlers was through federal regulations imposed by congress. An interstate commerce law required brand inspection of all cattle shipped across state lines. Brand inspection put an end to wholesale shipments of stolen beef by rail.

(To be continued)



# THE

By  
**SHAD  
COLLINS**



With the other  
hand he flung the  
man halfway across  
the room. . . .



*Two guns won't make a man—till he  
learns to look at the smoking end of one  
of 'em!*

**W**HEN Rod Brandon rode into Wagon Tongue from the Half Moon Hills, he was a handsome picture. Dressed in white angora chaps, a white Stetson, and fancy boots, packing two white handled double-action six-guns and riding a hopped-up calico pony, he looked like something out of a mail order catalogue. Beside him his saddle partner, a small wiry man, looked like a saddle tramp. But when Rod threw his reins over the hitching rail on the main street of the

little cowtown, nobody laughed at the dude clothing or the marked contrast of the two riders.

In Wagon Tongue Rod cut a big swath. The arrogant swing of his shoulders when he walked showed that he knew it. His father, Slow Bill Brandon, and their Lazy B ranch had the kind of reputation that commanded respect. Slow Bill had come into the country when it was new, had fought Indians and rustlers to establish his spread, and his cold



# DUDE GROWS UP

courage and quick gun had built a legend and a ranch.

"You go on down to the depot and see about the cars, Jim," Rod told the little puncher. "I'm going to circulate around some. Got to celebrate my birthday."

"Don't start celebratin' too hard," Jim Lannigan said. "The old man don't like that—besides, I'm supposed to stick along with you."

"Don't worry about me," the boy said, shrugging his shoulders impatiently. "I can look after myself. You just go get the business done. I'll see you later."

"All right," Jim said, "but stay out of the Palace. That Jackson, he don't like nothin' about the Lazy B. Some bad men drift through here and they all hit there."

"You just get on about your business, Jim. I'll take care of mine." He swung away, swaggering up the street to the nearest saloon.

"Damn all spoiled brats," Jim muttered. He started down toward the depot.

There were few men in the first saloon. Rod nodded to one or two of them, men his father knew well, and ordered whisky. The raw liquor stung his throat and left him gasping. Eyes watering, he looked carefully down the bar to see if anyone had noticed, but no one seemed to be paying attention to him. He poured his shot glass full and drank again, a little more successfully. It was the first liquor he had ever tasted, and to him it was a sign that he was a man, had grown up at last, was finally free from the endless advice and restrictions of his father.

Rod poured himself another drink, and went on thinking about his father, how the old man had always been trying to protect him, coddle him, keep all the hard knocks away, and, it seemed to him now, keep all the fun out of his life. The old man must be slowing down a lot, he thought to himself. Getting awful careful now, and he used to be a regular hells, they say. Rod stood there drinking his whisky, knowing he was strutting too much finery and liking the feeling—knowing, too, he looked all right.

He was beginning to feel a little fuzzy from the raw booze and was thinking about leaving the place, when the two men came in. Rod looked them over.

They stopped a moment at the door, blinking their eyes to accustom them to the darkness of the interior; then they moved up to the bar, one of them calling for whisky in a loud voice. Rod noticed the men because of that in an offhand way. One was big and noisy, the other thin, with the dead white

face of a sick man, his sunken eyes flat and black and emotionless.

The big man picked up his drink before he noticed Rod. He paused with the whisky halfway to his mouth and roared with sudden ugly laughter.

"A mail order man," he said loudly to no one in particular. "A damned dude."

With one hand Rod knocked the glass away from the man's mouth. With the other he knocked the man halfway across the bar. The big man hit the floor and lay there.

The other men in the bar started through the door at the rear, crowding each other. The big man's partner stepped carefully back away from the bar, his left hand hooked in his belt, his right lying relaxed and easy against the holster on his hip.

"Now let's see you get those shiny new guns out," the slender man said. His voice was flat and colorless like a man who is tired or very bored.

Rod noticed things about him then for the first time—the white left hand and the bronzed right that had never worn a glove, the marks of a gun fighter. He looked into the expressionless eyes of the gunman and read his death there as surely as if the man had spoken, and suddenly he was sick and scared. He knew if he made just one move toward the pearl handles of his guns he would be dead the next second. He began to back toward the door, walking stiff-legged, his whole body wooden with tension. The only sound was the jingling of his spurs, the sound coming as merry as sleigh bells at Christmas and loud as a carillon, almost as loud as the beating of his heart.

The gunman's face changed, a faint humorless smile touched it. He stepped forward and, as Rod felt the saloon doors at his back, his left hand flashed out, slapping the boy's face hard.

"Draw, you yellow—"

But Rod backed on through the doors, his hands held stiffly away from his sides. The last thing he saw before the doors swung to was the blinding contempt in the bitter eyes of the other. Then he turned and walked mechanically to his horse. He expected to feel the bite of lead between his shoulder blades and his chest felt full of hot rocks, but he got to the calico, mounted and rode out fast.

A half mile down the trail he pulled the horse to a walk. He drew the fancy guns from his holsters and threw them as far away as he could. He was retching so hard he held to the pommel with both hands to keep from falling.

BACK at the ranch, he went to his room and packed his old war bag. He heard his father moving about downstairs. He scribbled a note for him and left it lying on the dresser.

"I'm going to Broken River line camp. Be there a month or so. Rod."

He picked up his stuff and went quietly down the back stairs. At the corral he did not acknowledge the greetings of the few cowboys. He climbed on the calico and rode out.

The Broken River cut through the Half Moon hills ten miles north of the Lazy B. Not a wide river, but wild, running through a narrow canyon, most of its journey it formed a natural drift fence. Two miles west of the trail ford on the river, the canyon walls fell away and he rode into a little park. The small area, thickly covered with trees, was a splash of color now, the late sun touching the autumn leaves with an unreal brilliance, like metal.

He rode across the park. On the other side, set solidly back into a hill was a small, tightly constructed log cabin. He flung his war bag on the steps and led the calico around to the corral at the rear.

The cabin was clean inside. Probably some of the cowboys, hunting strays, had been there within the last week or so. In a roughly built cooler, where the spring came out of the hill near the cabin, he found bacon and ham and some jerked beef. In the cabin there was a huge supply of canned goods stored up for whoever was to occupy the line camp in the winter. Rod made himself a meal of ham and beans and biscuits and was surprised to find himself hungry. Then as darkness fell across the valley he rolled into one of the bunks. He wanted to sleep, to avoid thinking about what had happened during the day, but he couldn't make it. The white face of the gunman kept forming itself in his mind. The contemptuous eyes scared him. He tossed and turned in his bunk trying to shut it out. At last, exhausted, he fell into a haunted sleep.

The next day in midmorning, little Jim Lannigan rode up to the cabin.

"Howdy," he said quietly, swinging down from his horse. "Don't you get thinkin' you can run away from me, you young maverick. I been yore maw since yore own maw died. You can't light a shuck an' leave me behind."

"Run away," Rod said bitterly. "That's about all I can do."

"Nothin' of the kind," Jim said. "I head about yore run-in. Know who that gunny was? That was Slip Connors. If you'd just batted an eye wrong, you'd be dead now."

"Better'n bein' a coward."

"You ain't a coward, not with that Brandon blood in you. It's just like huntin'—first time you spot a bull elk, you're apt to get buck fever."

"I ran away. You can't change that by talkin' about it."

Lannigan said nothing and in the days that followed while the two were riding the canyons of the Half Moon hills, rounding up small bunches of stray stock and starting them moving south to the winter pastures near the ranch, there was no reference to the affair at Wagon Tongue.

One day at noon they were sitting on the porch after eating, getting the last of the fall sunlight. Jim pulled out his old hogleg and began shooting at a tin can. He shot slowly and deliberately and each time the can jumped under the impact of a slug.

"You got a gun, Rod?" he asked. "Might as well have a little shootin' match to see who does the dishes."

Rod looked at the little puncher whose face seemed innocent of all guile. Then he went into the shack and hunted through his war bag. He fished out a battered .45 he had carried sometimes as a kid. He came back out to the porch, loading the gun.

Jim did not ask what had happened to the fancy double action guns the boy once had. He threw another can toward the river and said, "Yore turn."

That was the beginning of Jim's course of instruction.

"It takes me longer to get a gun out than to go home after it," he told Rod. "So once I got her, I got to hit what I shoot at."

He tied the trigger back on Rod's gun, teaching the boy how to roll the six-shooter, releasing the hammer as the gun came level. And each day Rod practised drawing the gun, trying for that extra split second of speed that was the difference between the man who fought more than once—and the one who didn't.

The thing in his mind was not vengeance, but to find out how much of a fool he had been when he went riding into Wagon Tongue with his two shiny guns.

WHEN the snow came, they rode less and less. There were few cattle at their end of the range now, and the snow was deep enough to make riding difficult. One day on a routine check ride, Jim came back with news.

"Over on the northwest corner of the range we got some neighbors," he said. They had finished eating and were sitting in front of the roaring fireplace.

"Neighbors?" Rod didn't understand him.

Jim gave a short laugh. "Call 'em that. I got a hunch they're some of the wild bunch. Maybe got too hot for them down in the Hole-in-the-Wall and they drifted north. Could be some of Slip Connors' boys. They got two-



three different outside brands on their horses. I worked up close enough to look. Four men in a lean-to they set up."

When Rod said nothing, the little puncher looked at him. "We better take a closer look and maybe tell 'em to move on. Don't want them to get the idea the Lazy B is their home." He chuckled dryly.

The next day they rode over to the part of the range where Jim had made his discovery. Coming to the mouth of a little valley, Jim held up his hand.

"Better leave the horses here," he said. "They might make a racket. Now I figure I'll just make a circle and come in behind 'em. You go down the valley and stake you out a good spot and wait."

"No," Rod said. "I'll go around. They're more apt to see you that way. I own this ranch. You're just workin' here." He grinned at Jim as he spoke, but he began to have the familiar tight feeling in his chest. The rocks were growing there again.

He took his gun from the saddle and started up the side of the valley. From the rim he could see the lean-to in a little cup in the hills. In the dead still air the smoke went straight up from the cabin, a solid column, fraying out at the top and disappearing in the intense blue of the sky. The snow crystals in the trees sparkled brilliantly in the cold sun. The whole landscape was hushed in snow, but the air was so calm he could hear the stamp of the horses in the corral behind the lean-to. He worked his way around until he was directly behind the cabin, about a hundred and fifty yards away. He crawled into a small bunch of pines, being careful not to shake them as he went in.

No one moved around the cabin. The smoke and the horses were the only signs that it was inhabited. He wanted to call out, to challenge them as he and Jim had planned, but no sound came. His throat was tight and dry and all he could think of was the swift death that might come spitting from the cabin if he made a sound. He felt as lonely as if he were the only man in the world, except for those enemies in the cabin. He wished his horse were near. Now with the men between him and his mount, he felt trapped and lay there in the snow, sweating hard, afraid to call out.

How long it took he didn't know. At last he heard Jim's voice faint and far away.

"You in the cabin!"

There was no answer. The silence piled up over the sunny valley. Then the cabin erupted with sound. Shots began to whine through the air. He knew he should shoot and pulled up his saddle gun, but he couldn't, afraid to draw fire.

Perhaps in lifting the gun he shook some of the snow from the small pines over him.

Suddenly the air over his head was snapping and singing with rifle fire and the snow on the loaded branches was falling in miniature avalanches. He began to crawl back and the fire intensified. They knew where he was for sure now. They could trace him by the falling snow as he pulled his way out, scared and no longer careful of shaking the brush.

They began to hunt for him carefully, the bullets searching for him through the underbrush. Once they had him bracketed and he lay behind a rock, the slugs cutting the air behind him and whining away from the frozen ground in front. At last he got over the rim and started to circle the cabin, running, now that he was out of sight, falling in the deep snow, dropping his rifle, running again.

Jim was waiting for him at the horses. The little cowboy was wooden faced as they mounted and rode away.

"Just because they're on our land," Rod said. "we don't have to—"

"A man don't let rustlers live on his land," the little cowboy replied. It was a flat statement, but in it Rod felt a contempt for what he had done. They didn't speak on the ride back, nor in the days following.

Some days later Jim rode in at nightfall. Sitting in front of the fireplace rolling a cigarette, he said, "Those were Slip Connors' boys. They pulled out yesterday." He did not look at Rod.

**I**T MIGHT have been New Year's when Jim decided to ride into Wagon Tongue.

Living as they had been, cut off from town and the home ranch, except for an occasional visit from the chuck wagon, they had lost track of time. After the fight at the outlaw cabin, there was no more easy comradeship between them. Jim no longer hauled out his six-shooter at noon and blazed away at tin cans. The two spoke seldom, the tension growing between them from day to day.

As he was getting into his bunk one night, Jim said, "I'm ridin' into town tomorrow." There was a challenge in his tone, as if he expected Rod to object. Rod said nothing, but he wanted to urge the little puncher not to go. He knew Connors and his gunmen might be in the town. He wanted to warn Jim, to argue with him, but he knew it would do no good. He did not offer to ride along. He did not want to go anyway, and he was afraid Jim would refuse. He spent most of the night tossing and turning in his bunk.

In the morning he told Jim, "I'm coming in with you."

"No."

"You might run into Connors or some of his crew."

"I don't think so," Jim said. "If I do, I'll handle 'em alone." There was no malice in his

voice, but for Rod there was something worse. Jim wasn't even disgusted with him. He had just written the boy off as of no value in a bad spot. He watched the little cowboy ride off, an empty feeling in his stomach. It was a fine day, the sun bright and the air dead calm, but as he stood beside the cabin trying to roll a cigarette, watching Jim grow smaller as he rode into the distance, Rod didn't notice the weather.

At last he went around to the corral and saddled the calico. Going into the cabin, he swung his gunbelt around his hips. He pulled the old hogleg from the holster and spun the cylinder to be sure it was loaded. Then he climbed on the calico and set out after Jim.

Wagon Tongue was doing a thriving business. Cow ponies and buckboards lined the hitching rail, and the livery stable where Rod left the calico was almost full. The hostler gave him a funny look as he took the reins of the calico. As Rod started away, the man called after him.

"Slip Connors is in town."

They had his number, Rod thought bitterly. Still he was glad the livery man had spoken. It confirmed his fears, anyway. He went up the street slowly, trying to find Jim. When he did locate him, he did not speak to the puncher, but kept behind him. Rod was not even sure why he had come. To think of himself as coming to protect Jim was something that did not enter his head. Still he kept along behind his friend, his hands sweating in spite of the cold, eaten up with worry and excitement. He had an oddly guilty feeling—as if Jim might get in trouble because of him.

When Jim entered one of the bars, Rod followed him. He stood at the bar not drinking, watching the little rider trying his luck at faro. The man beside Rod put his glass on the bar and leaned over.

"Connors is at the Palace Bar," the man said. "I figured you ought to know." Rod nodded without looking, afraid of the contempt he might find on the other's face, a look he had seen too often that day.

A half hour later Jim got up from the table.

"Guess I'll try my luck at the Palace," he said loudly. There was a little silence as he rose and then the excited babble of expectation.

If Jim saw Rod as he passed him at the bar, he gave no sign of recognition. Rod followed him across the street. The Palace was the biggest bar in town and it was crowded. Rod got to the bar and stood there, his eyes following Jim. The cowboy went down the bar about midway and ordered a drink. A man standing with his back turned, faced around. It was Connors.

"The Lazy B is in town," Connors said. His face was the same dead white that Rod

had remembered. The man beside Connors was the big outlaw Rod had slugged. He was a little drunk. He looked at Jim and a sneer grew on his face.

Jim gave them a cool look of appraisal and picked up his drink.

"Didn't I see you boys down on a corner of the Lazy B a couple weeks ago?" His words were cool and contemptuous.

Rod's heart tried to jump out of his chest. He thought, *Now he'll get himself killed for sure. . . .* He started working his way through the crowd toward Jim.

"Where's that yella dude boss of yours?" the big outlaw snarled.

Like a rattler striking, Jim threw the whisky in his glass at the gunman. He staggered back, rubbing his eyes and cursing.

"You little rat. I'll kill you for that," the big man said.

The place began to empty fast. Some went through the doors and some through the windows, the first of them not even bothering to open the sash. In a few seconds only Jim and the two outlaws were standing at the middle of the bar. The bartender was lying flat on the floor among his kegs. Rod was behind Jim, and at the rear of the bar a seemingly drunk cowboy peered foggily at them over the rim of his glass.

Rod's throat was so tight he was afraid he couldn't speak. He plucked at Jim's sleeve.

"Never mind this, Jim," he said. "You don't make enough money to have to fight for the Lazy B." He tried to make it sound funny, but it wouldn't.

"It's the dude," Slip said in his flat monotone. "But he's lost his pretty guns."

"He slugged me," the big outlaw said. "Go for your gun, Brandon."

With his left hand, keeping his eyes riveted on the two men, Rod pulled Jim away from the bar and tried to push him toward the door. He could feel the sick fright trying to climb into his throat, but he wouldn't let it, and then in a fraction of a second he didn't have to.

The big outlaw started his draw and Rod's hand flashed to his holster, snapping the old six-gun into action. He did not look at the big outlaw, seeing only the blur of speed that was Connors' right hand and the gun flaming up at him. He felt a jarring shock in his side as he fired, and that was the last clear thing he remembered as he rolled the heavy gun, shooting at the splashes of flame and the figures of men he could only half see through the blur of pain and gunsmoke. Someone was shooting from the far end of the bar, and he sent a raking shot that ripped the mahogany. There was another gun behind him, and no more shots from the bar.

It was suddenly very quiet and Rod realized  
(Continued on page 129)



By **FRANK WARD**

Two months later he turned his back on a detail of infuriated officers—after killing one of them. . . .



# POWDERSMOKE PILGRIM:

*The Story of John Wesley Hardin*

**J**OHN SELMAN walked quietly into El Paso's Acme saloon that night, with his hand on the butt of his six-shooter. Just inside the batwing doors he paused warily. Against the long mahogany bar a few feet away a slim, white-faced man was juggling dice with a friend. Through the mutter of conversation and the clink of bottles his words came clearly to Selman.

"Four sixes to beat—"

And Selman, a peace officer sworn to uphold law and order, flipped his gun from its holster and shot the gambler through the back of the head. Under the concussion of the old black powder Colt the overhead lamps

swung and flickered. The man at the bar, his brains blown out, slumped forward. Casually, Selman pumped two more slugs into his victim's body. No one in the place made a move that might have been interpreted as sudden.

Sheathing his .45 the law officer said gently, "He was reachin' for his gun, gents. I reckon you all saw."

At his trial some days later, the grizzled, 58-year-old gunman repeated the same story and won an acquittal. No man disputed the statement. No judge would have convicted Selman had some foolhardy soul suggested that the killing was cold-blooded murder. In-

---

*John Wesley Hardin, the preacher's son,  
wore two guns to teach school—and wore  
out his welcome in the toughest towns  
of Texas!*

---

stead, El Paso heaved a long sigh of relief and buried the most prodigious killer and bad-man ever spawned by the Lone Star State.

John Wesley Hardin, theology student, Sunday school teacher, lawyer and six-gun artist, was dead.

The year was 1895. In the forty-two years of his life Hardin had killed thirty-five men, by conservative count. Hardcases all, they had parted company with this deceptively mild-mannered young man and their earthly careers in many roaring frontier towns from Abilene, Kansas, to Bonham in Texas, where Hardin was born on May 26, 1853.

When the Texan got his first man at fifteen, the Civil War had just smoldered out, leaving behind it the remnants of the Confederacy. If Texas had been a hell-raisin' lawless territory before, it flamed anew under the rule of unscrupulous carpetbaggers. No Texan who survived the Battle of the Wilderness felt kindly disposed toward the invaders, and in those bitter ashes of defeat Wes Hardin, son of a preacher who had traded his Book for a Rebel cavalry saber, grew up heir to violence.

The first victim to fall before John Wesley's .44 Army Colt was a sullen buck Negro named Mose. Mose, having been beaten in a matched wrestling bout with Hardin and another youth, made the fatal error of seeking redress next day. Hardin was riding alone when Mose jumped out into the trail and snatched at the bridle. In the scuffle, the youngster hauled out his six-shooter and blew sundry holes in Mose, who died within a few days. Hardin packed his warsack and lit out for Logallis Prairie, 25 miles away, where his older brother was bearing out the family's alleged preference for peace by teaching school.

Young Wes had bitten off a large mouthful. In the old Texas, Mose would have gone underground with a prayer and the pat of a shovel. Now the troops, Yankee men who liked their law neat and orderly, took out after Hardin in dead earnest. Meanwhile the boy was beating the brush for the wild steers that roamed through the brasada by the thousands, unbranded, any man's fortune.

The Hardins were a loyal bunch. Five or six of them went out the hard way because of Wes Hardin, at one time or another. His relatives were spread across Texas like tumbleweeds. Dixons, Milligans, Barrickmans, Clements, Cunninghams and Andersons could call him cousin, and many of them were as hell-bent as young John Wesley. They were a hard-riding outfit, fast on the draw and not adverse to the odd keg of whiskey. After the shooting of Mose they made cover for the boy. It was some time before the Yankees got close enough to disturb his outlook on life. When that happened he laid a deadfall for them, snugging down in a creek bed and biding

his time. As the trio rode past, Hardin tripped the triggers of his old muzzle-loading 10-gauge and blew a pair of them out of their kaks. The third soldier came off his horse running, gun out and flaming. Hardin dropped the shotgun, snapped a shot at the trooper and dropped him in his tracks. Then the youth dragged himself aboard his pony and rode off, nursing a crippled arm. Friends hid him out and planted the three dead cavalrymen so adroitly that the government never actually could prove just what happened to them.

But Wes Hardin's days in that part of Texas were numbered. For a time he taught school, pounding book-learning into the heads of boys and girls his own age. He was sixteen then and had slain five men. At the end of term he was offered a renewal of contract, but the buzzing drowsiness of the schoolroom had palled on him. Again he packed his saddle roll and stepped out toward the open range.

FOR two years he kept just beyond legal rifle range, building himself a big rep as a curly wolf around the horse meets and cow camps. Despite his slender build and boyish innocence, Hardin knew that he was as big as any man when he had one of Colonel Colt's equalizers in his fist. He was a born gambler. He beat Ben Hinds, a notorious killer and outlaw, at seven-up and forced the older man to eat crow when Hinds threatened to beat him to a pulp.

In his mild voice, Hardin murmured, "I stand in a man's boots, Ben. Don't spoil your fun because I'm a kid."

Hinds, grinning wickedly, made a sudden lunge toward the boy. He ran belly-first into the long barrel of John Wesley's gun.

"I'm a little on the scrap myself," Hardin said. "Don't crowd, gentlemen. If I see any guns out this six-shooter is liable to go off." Hinds, with several friends behind him, grinned a weak grin and decided to apologize. John Wesley Hardin was growing up.

His tough rep led to another killing. He had been arrested on what he swore was a false charge, and was being taken from Waco to another town. Somehow the boy got his nimble hands on a gun and cold-bloodedly killed his guard. A few days later he was picked up by three officers of the Texas state police, later to become the famed Rangers. Waiting patiently until their vigilance had relaxed, Hardin slew the trio and went over the far horizon at a long lope.

Glorying as he did in his brassy reputation, Hardin was beginning to notice the warmth of that climate. An entire state police force, not to mention several marshals and sheriffs, were looking for him high and low. John Wesley hooked up with a trail herd



heading up the Chisholm Trail toward Abilene, Kansas, in February of 1871.

He had eight years of freedom left to him then. He was wild, too handy with a Colt ever to reform, carving for himself with hot lead a throne that was to cost him sixteen years in a state penitentiary. But at nineteen he helped haze those Texas steers up the old Chisholm toward the end of the rails at Abilene, cocky, confident and insolent, a young gunslinger who killed quickly and without regret. Writers of that period call him the deadliest man with a gun ever to drift north out of Texas.

Abilene in those days was a first edition of what Dodge was to become a year later. Texas cattlemen, trail-weary after the grueling drive through the Nation, hit Abilene like the fore-runners of a landslide. They rode into town decked out in their Sunday best, with their six-shooters hanging wickedly off their right hips and their spurs let out to the town notch. And what they did under the bright lights was considered good clean fun, even when they were roaring back down the trail toward home with a posse of embittered citizens and deputy marshals on their tails.

Young Wes Hardin jogged into Abilene from his cow camp across the river, still in his dust-shrouded trail clothes, hungering for those lights and a drink to cut the alkali in his throat. The first saloon Hardin saw was the Bull's Head, run jointly by two tough gentlemen, Ben Thompson and Phil Coe. Hardin racked his pony and clumped through the tandem doors and hitched his heel over the brass rail. He must have looked an ornery-enough specimen, clad in his sweat-stained clothes, unshaven, his steely eyes red-rimmed and tired. At any rate, he was hard enough to suit Ben Thompson.

**T**HOMPSON was as tough as an old, spurred boot and as dangerous to handle as a cocked six-gun. He approached Hardin, appraising the young Texan, and made mention of one Wild Bill Hickok, who dealt law in Abilene at that time.

"Bill is a Yankee," Thompson informed Hardin, "and he always picks on Southerners, 'specially Tejanos, when he gets on a killin' streak. Figured you might like to know."

Hardin grunted. "I'm not doin' any man's fightin' but my own just now, but I know how to stick by my friends," he said. "If Mr. Hickok wants killin' so bad, why not do it yoreself?"

Thompson and Hickok were as friendly as a pair of hungry cougars on the prowl. "Well," explained Ben, "I'm in business here. I'd rather get someone else to do it."

"You're talkin' to the wrong man, then," Hardin answered softly. He finished his drink

and went out to look the town over. He ran into Old Man Johnson, who had rodded the trail drive. Johnson took him into a saloon.

"Like you to meet an old friend of mine, Jack. Wild Bill Hickok."

John Wesley Hardin and Wild Bill Hickok. For a moment they stood there, each sizing up the other. In the background men edged toward the walls, muttering among themselves.

There were no preliminaries. Hickok stepped forward, garbed rakishly in river gambler's clothes, the butts of his guns bulging the fine broadcloth of his long cutaway coat.

"I have a folder from Texas in my pocket, offering a reward for your arrest," he said crisply, watching the Texan steadily.

Hardin smiled his amiable boyish smile.

"Are you arresting me?" he asked quietly.

"Not now," Wild Bill decided. "Come and talk with me."

Hickok has been described as the most handsome man ever to set a saddle. He was about thirty-four when he met Hardin, an admirable figure of a man. He stood at least three inches taller than the nondescript John Wesley, yet Hardin knew well that at a similar age Hickok could show no such record as he himself possessed. He followed the marshal over to a table and they ordered. Movement resumed in the saloon, conversation picked itself up.

"I'm favorably impressed with you, young man," Hickok told Hardin. "But don't let Ben Thompson influence you. I've heard he made talk with you earlier this evening. And you're in enough trouble already." He mentioned an incident between Hardin and some Mexicans, during which the young killer had fanned down some five or six men. Finally Hickok stood up.

"If I can do you any favor, let me know."

Hardin nodded thoughtfully and watched the marshal walk arrogantly toward the door. During the next few days the boy loafed around Abilene, investigating bars and playing faro and poker with the town gamblers.

He had his next run-in with the marshal a few nights after their first meeting. John Wesley and some of the trail crew had been raising hell in the Apple Jack saloon when Wild Bill strode into the place and demanded that they check their guns if they intended staying in town.

"I'm ready to leave now," Hardin said, grinning, "so I reckon I won't bother to take 'em off."

Hickok shrugged and left. Hardin, spurred on by some devil and the rumor that Abilene's marshal had been planning to plant a slug between his shoulder blades, followed him out into the street. Down the block someone let out a war whoop and Hickok, nettled, whirled on the Texas man, drawing a pistol.

"What are you yelling about?" he snapped. "Why haven't you taken off those guns?"

"Hell, marshal, I'm just takin' in the town."

"I arrest you. Take off those pistols."

No man knows how many windys Hickok had had run on him in his life, but Hardin pulled one then. He lifted his guns from their holsters, forefingers hooked through the trigger guards, spun them in a blurred motion and had the marshal covered before that worthy could cock and fire his piece. Some experts say that Hardin invented this trick, known as the "border roll," and that Wild Bill had never had it happen to him before.

The duped marshal could see the kill-lust burning in the gunman's eyes, and he knew the boy would kill him at the slightest excuse. He holstered his gun, unruffled, and talked Hardin out of killing him.

"You're the quickest and gamest boy I ever knew," he purred. "I don't know who's been primin' you, but I've never had any intent of shooting you in the back. What reason would I have? Put up those guns and we'll go in here and have a talk. I want to give you some good advice."

Whatever that advice was, they left the saloon good friends, although Hickok had reason later to go gunning for the youngster in dead earnest.

**H**ARDIN had a knack of making things lively wherever he went. Within the week he was involved in a restaurant brawl. While he and a friend named Pain were eating there one evening some drunken men staggered in, mouthing insults against Texans of any age or description. Hardin put down his fork, stood up and called one man's bluff. Hands slapped leather, guns roared, and Hardin put a slug through his adversary's mouth.

When John Wesley reached Cottonwood, thirty-five miles away, he reined into a coulee to breathe his horse and await the results. Nothing happened. Hardin shrugged, flipped the fired percussion caps from his six-shooter, and reloaded the gun. Then he rode to an outlying cow camp and settled down for a time.

Back in Abilene Wild Bill Hickok was swearing publicly that should John Wesley Hardin shove his nose into Abilene again, he would personally salivate Hardin's hide. And while the law waited, Hardin had the gall to accept a deputy's star from a group of cattlemen who wanted a Mexican named Bideo for the slaying of a Texas cowboy, Billy Coran. One thousand dollars American went with the star if Hardin got his man. With a companion, Jim Rogers, Hardin set out to cold-trail the Mex killer. One hundred miles away, in Bluff Creek, he caught up with his man, eating in a greasy spoon. John Wesley

sauntered into the place, ordered Bideo to surrender and shot him between the eyes when he resisted arrest.

Hardin's last meeting with Hickok might have resulted in fatalities had the marshal decided to press the issue. The Texan returned to Abilene with the reward money and took over a saloon for the celebration. Hickok found him that night, when Hardin and a bunch of the boys were whooping it up.

Coming up to the table the marshal said crisply, "You can't hurrah me, if that's what you're here for. I won't have it!"

"I don't want to hurrah you," Hardin said sincerely. "I came back because I've got a right to be here. That fellow in the restaurant tried to run on me."

Hickok considered for a while, his hand brushing the bulge under his coat. Then he smiled and said, "So I've heard. Well, I congratulate you on getting your Mexican. I'll have a drink with you and your friends."

The reprieve did nothing to soothe Hardin's natural orneriness. Two days passed quietly and then he shot and killed a burglar who was breaking into his room. While Wild Bill was on the rampage, John Wesley was riding hard and fast out of Abilene in his shirt-tail and boots. He paused long enough at a cow camp to borrow a brace of six-shooters, a Winchester and a pair of trousers, and to exercise his peculiar form of humor on three lawmen who were on his trail. Among these was Tom Carson, Hickok's deputy. Hardin got the drop on them, forced the boys to shuck their pants, and sent them homeward.

"It was only fair," Hardin said afterward, "that they should share some of my fun."

Luckily, he never met Wild Bill Hickok again.

At twenty John Hardin rode back into Texas. He made himself at home by killing Green Paramoor, a Negro attached to the state police force. Bound for trouble, even after his marriage to Jane Bowen, he quarreled with a man named Phil Sublet and in the ensuing duel both men were wounded. Two months later he turned his back to a detail of infuriated officers—after killing one of them.

But Hardin was swinging on the end of his own twine. The whole of Texas had unfriendly eyes on him. Thirty men had gone down before his flaming guns. Now, wounded and desperate, he agreed to surrender. Even that formality was marked by gunfire. When he reached under his pillow to hand over his six-shooter, a zealous deputy drew and put a bullet through his knee. They picked up the wreckage and ferried him to Austin and then to Gonzales, where he was tossed in a cell.

Jail lacked appeal to John Hardin. He cut through the bars of his cell and rode out of town on a horse supplied by a friend, Manning



Clements. A wiser man would have cut north to Oklahoma or slipped across Texas to California. Hardin stayed. He murdered a man named J. P. Morgan for no particular reason and increased his own stature as a choice tid-bit for ranging peace officers. He had ceased to be a public sensation and was fast becoming a public menace. Only his friends of long standing held him dear. And they paid for it.

His brother, Joe, a lawyer with a fashionable practice, was hanged by irate citizens who connected him with the name of Hardin. The young killer went on undaunted, joining up with the Taylors in a feud against the Suttons. In the course of this range war he killed a pair of lawmen, Jack Helms of DeWitt County and Charles Webb, a deputy sheriff from Brown County.

It took the Pinkerton Detective Agency to snare Hardin. They shot one of his companions in a railway coach and brought the great man from New Orleans, where he had been hiding out, back to Texas, but not before he had killed two of their operatives. He was tried and convicted of the murder of Deputy Charles Webb and sent up for twenty-five years. He was then in his twenty-fifth year and had thirty-five notches on his guns.

On March 16, 1894, John Wesley Hardin walked out of his cell to stand blinking in the early Spring sunlight. Those sixteen years away from that sun had taken their toll of Hardin. He faced a world that lusted to tempt his skill with the six-gun, and only a faint vestige of that deadly speed remained. His wife had died while he was behind bars and he stood alone. From Gonzales he moved to

Karnes County, and thence to El Paso, where he tried to practice the law he had so diligently studied in prison. He married again, but his wife soon left him. Perhaps he had broken the law too often to dispense it with any sense of conviction. Perhaps in El Paso he found some taste of the doubtful glory he had once enjoyed. Gradually he lapsed back into his old habits, spending his nights in gambling halls and saloons. He was warned by the mayor that he would be shot down without compunction if he tried to be a curly wolf in El Paso. The two leading lawmen, George Scarborough and John Selman, held eager and heated debates as to which of them would be the first to drop hammer on John Hardin. Young hopefuls, new to the trigger trade, sought to boost their own reputations at Hardin's expense, and Hardin was forced to talk his way around these eager young killers instead of shooting through them. Men chuckled at him, but privately. He was still John Wesley Hardin and no one could accurately gauge what murderous skill still remained in him.

Hardin himself provided the excuse for his own murder. Selman's son had arrested a woman who claimed allegiance to the pale-faced gambler, and Hardin, with some return of the old insolent spirit, went forth to brace Selman over the matter. After torrid insults had been thrown from both sides, Selman snapped, "The next time you see me, you better be wearin' a gun."

Hardin's last words to John Selman were, "When I meet you I'll come a'smoking and make you pull like a wolf around the block!"

He never got the chance.



# GUN GHOSTS NEVER DIE

*A lobo past will live as long as a man, but Eben Storm had one comfort the night his guns betrayed it—it would not follow him to Glory!*

**B**ARE-HEADED, a soft breeze ruffling his cotton-white hair, old Eben Storm had his back against a big cottonwood, his chin on his chest, fishing pole forgotten as he dozed peacefully there on the creek bank, back of his place of business. A big catfish had gotten away with the bait and Eben hadn't even felt the pull on the line. But he came awake suddenly when shod hoofs rattled across the wooden bridge spanning the creek.

He blinked, looked up and saw a man on a big white stallion—a tall man wearing a cream-colored Stetson and an expensive looking dark suit. Eben scowled.

"Hello, Eben," the rider said. "Wouldn't think with all the business you've got, you'd find time for fishing."

Eben pulled his line in and placed fresh bait on the hook. He said, without looking up, "When a man gets as old as I am, Ramer, he slows down some. He don't care about making a lot of money and working himself to a frazzle feeding a lot of hungry Texans."

The smile stayed on the big man's lips while he reached in his coat pocket and took out a sack of tobacco. He said, "I can remember when you had a different slant on things, when you had an idea you wanted to make a lot of money fast."

Eben Storm's eyes clouded and his hand gripped the fishpole hard. "That was a long time ago," he said. "Anybody's liable to be crazy once."

Ramer spilled tobacco into a wheatstraw paper and began shaping a smoke. He kept staring at Eben steadily. He said, "I remember the old man saying you were a good gent to take along, that you had plenty of savvy when it came to handling a gun."

Eben's eyes were on the water, but he wasn't seeing it. He said, "I made a mistake, riding with your dad and his bunch. I had sense enough to call it quits before I got in too deep."

Ramer said softly, "They're still looking for the last of the Red Mountain Gang."

Eben looked up and said, "An' folks here-

abouts might think twice afore doin' business with Wild Ben Scodan's boy, even if he went by the name of Ramer."

The smile was gone from Ramer's lips now. He flipped the cigarette away and picked up the reins. There was a hard shine to his eyes. He said, "You know what I mean, Eben. I'm a respected cattle buyer in this town and nobody better find out I was ever anything else. This is the first chance I've had to talk to you, and since you're thought so much of around here, I got to wondering if you might get some fool notion."

Eben shook his head. "I'm too old to be asking for trouble now. Besides, what you do ain't no skin off my nose."

The big man let the white stallion feel the heels of his high-polished boots. The smile was on his lips as he rode on into the town of Osceola.

Eben Storm tried to get his mind back on fishing, but he guessed he might as well give it up. He thought he had put those gunsmoke years behind him until, a couple of weeks ago, Judd Ramer had come to town.

**"E** BEN! Eben Storm! You get up here right now!"

He twisted his head around and looked over his shoulder at the plump, round-faced little woman in the doorway of the restaurant. "All right, Mollie," he growled. "Keep your apron on—I'm coming."

He sighed heavily as he got to his feet and made his way up the path, a slow-moving man with a square, ruddy face. He opened the back screen door and went through the living quarters into the restaurant kitchen. He saw Mollie's pink-cheeked face was moist as she worked over the big wood stove, and he saw the fresh apple pies she had just brought from the oven.

Eben's mouth began to water and he took a step toward the pies, but Mollie gave him a glance that stopped him right where he was. His wife put her hands on her heavy hips and he could see the sparks in her eyes.



By  
**RAY**  
**GAULDEN**



His hand touched  
the pan of hot  
grease and he flung  
it. . . .

"You'll get some of that pie, if there's any left after the noon rush. Right now, how about making yourself a little useful and getting up to the cash register?"

Eben was on the verge of telling her a few things, but just then, Cora Leeds, the pretty little yellow-haired waitress, came flying into the kitchen, singing out, "Another order of roast beef, Mollie."

Mumbling something under his breath, Eben went through the archway and into the dining room. There was a long counter on one side of the room and a row of booths on the other. At the far end of the counter was a little glass show case, filled with cigars and tobacco and matches.

Eben climbed onto his high stool, letting his gaze run the length of the room. The place

was beginning to fill up, but he didn't see anyone he recognized. And he could remember that not so long ago, hardly a man a week came in whom Eben didn't know by his first name.

But that was before the railroad came to change things, to make this once sleepy little town of Osceola a shipping point. Now the Texas cattlemen were bringing their herds up the trail and there were many dusty strangers trodding the plank walks.

The front door banged and Perry Weatherford, the marshal, came in and gave Eben a grin. He was a young man, solidly built, clear-eyed and good-natured. Eben caught Cora fluffing her hair a little as she came along the counter, a warm smile on her red lips. Old Eben had the impression that the girl

wasn't aware anybody else was in the place except that long-gear'd marshal, but he was a mite past such things. Still it seemed to him that here was one place where the law-dog could have used some nerve.

But thinking about it, Eben reckoned the young cuss had his hands full right now. For the last couple of weeks there had been plenty of trouble. Cattlemen who sold their herds for large sums of money were found in the alleys, knocked in the head, their pockets empty.

Eben hadn't noticed when Judd Ramer came in, but he saw the man slide out of a back booth later and come toward the front, pulling his cream-colored hat down on his head. He laid his check down on the counter and gave Eben that thin, sardonic smile.

"Catch any fish?"

Eben scowled and took the five dollar bill Ramer held out. He rang up the sale and put the change on the counter. He said, "You took all the fun out of it, Judd."

Ramer picked up the change without taking his eyes from the restaurant man. He said, "Don't let it slow you down, yunker. I like the food here—that wife of yours knows how to cook. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't get along."

There was a sick, empty feeling inside Eben Storm, but there was anger too, and he wanted to tell Ramer to get the hell out of here, that there was some business he could do without. But what Eben said was, "Sure, Judd, we'll get along."

A tall Texan came up and asked for a sack of tobacco and Judd Ramer left. Eben watched him through the big front window until he was out of sight, until he entered his office a few doors down the street.

When the noon rush was over, Eben had his lunch, but there was no apple pie to go with the sweet milk and he had to get by with a piece of lemon. He had never cared much for those damned white-topped things, but it was better than nothing. Mollie was complaining of her feet hurting and she was giving the old Mexican woman the dickens because she wasn't doing the dishes to please her. Eben wished Mollie would ease up a little, because help was hard to get, and if the old woman should get mad and quit, he might have to help with the dishes himself.

Eben went down to Halderman's Bar, just as he had been doing every afternoon for ten years. They would play a little poker, he and Lew Halderman and maybe a couple of others. Just a friendly game for small stakes.

Lew was behind the bar when Eben went in. The saloonman was small; his hair was gray, but his face did not show his age.

He said, "Hello, Eben. Meet Tom Gillen. Used to know Tom down in El Paso. He

just came up the trail with a thousand head and sold them to Judd Ramer for a good price."

Eben shook hands with the big cowman and they had a drink from Lew's private bottle. Tom Gillen said, "Lew's been telling me that you're a poker player from way back."

Eben smiled and shook his head. "Lew likes to lay it on kind of thick, sometimes."

Doc Beldon came in and the four of them got a game going. Tom Gillen took out his billfold and Eben had a glimpse of some of the greenbacks. He heard Lew Halderman whistle softly.

"You're a fool, Tom, to be carrying that much dinero around with you. Why don't you put it in the bank?"

Gillen laughed. "You always did worry too much, Lew. This is the first real money I ever had and I kind of like the feel of it. Besides, I don't flash it around in front of everybody."

Eben could see that Halderman was a little worried. The saloonman said, "Just the same, Tom, you're taking a big chance. Things have been happening to gents with money in this town."

Gillen removed his coat and hung it on the back of his chair. He glanced at the hand Eben had dealt him. He said, "Lew, they'd have a hell of a fight on their hands if they tried to take this money. I'm going down the trail in the morning, back to the sweetest little woman in the whole state of Texas. And that kid of mine—say, I wish you gents could see her."

**W**HEN the supper rush was over and darkness had closed in on Osceola,

Eben finished checking the cash drawer and called it a day. He went out onto the back porch where he and Mollie spent most of their summer evenings. There were two old hide-bottomed rocking chairs and Mollie already occupied one of them. She had her shoes off and was busy with her knitting.

Eben settled himself and leaned back in the big rocker. He got his pipe going and sat there, staring idly at the thin bar of moonlight that lay across the creek down there below them.

Finally Mollie said, "The Texans are getting ready for another big night. Listen to the racket they're making out there on the street."

Eben nodded. "It sure ain't like it used to be, Mollie. Maybe we ought to sell the business and buy us a little place back in the hills where it's nice and quiet."

Mollie's fingers were busy with the needle and she did not look at him, but she said, "You're just talking to hear yourself and you know it. Why, they couldn't drag you out of this town."



"I guess you're right, Mollie."

Just then the sharp report of a gun caused Eben to stiffen and clamp his teeth down tightly on the stem of his pipe. Somewhere a man was yelling and boots were pounding along the plank walks. Eben cocked his head, listening, a nameless dread beginning to form inside him.

Mollie said, "Well, don't sit there like a fool. Go see what it was."

He heaved himself from the chair, a little reluctantly, and stepped off the porch, knocking his pipe against the railing. He went around the side of the building to the street and looked along its length. Halfway down, he saw that a crowd had already begun to gather near Ned Hassett's feed store.

Eben moved in that direction, a cold spot inside him growing and spreading. He saw Perry Weatherford come running across the street. Eben and the Marshal reached the feed store at the same time. The crowd fell back to let the lawman through and Eben followed. Then Eben stopped and stared at the man who lay in a twisted heap on the ground. It was Tom Gillen, the big cowman he had played cards with down at Halderman's Bar.

Perry Weatherford knelt for a moment, then straightened and shook his head. "He's dead."

There was a tightness in Eben's throat. He said, "I was playing cards with him this afternoon. He'd just sold his herd for a good price. Lew told him he shouldn't be carrying all that money around with him."

The marshal ran his eyes over the crowd. "Anybody see what happened?"

Ned Hassett came forward. He was a skinny man with a long neck. He said, "I was going over the books, Perry, when I heard the shot. I ran out to see two men runnin' down the alley." The feed store man swore softly. "Damned if this ain't getting to be a hell of a place. Not safe for a man to walk down the street after dark."

When the body had been removed, Eben walked down the street with the marshal. Weatherford looked worried. He said, more to himself than to Eben, "I can't be every place at once."

Eben said sympathetically, "You're doing all you can, son."

They passed one of the honkytonks that had opened since the town started to boom. Judd Ramer was standing on the porch, flipping a silver dollar. "A little trouble?" he asked.

Weatherford nodded gloomily. "Things can't go on like this. I'm going to ask the council for more help."

Eben was aware of Ramer's eyes upon him and he looked away, a sense of guilt rubbing him. Back in his head, a voice kept whispering, *That's old Ben Scodan's kid. His name's*

*not really Ramer. He's bad and it's most likely him that's behind the trouble in this town. You ought to talk, Eben—you ought to tell the law.*

But he couldn't talk; he couldn't open his mouth, because if he did, Judd would have a little something to say himself—a little story to tell about the Red Mountain Gang and a man who was still wanted. Old Eben would wind up in jail, and those bunks were pretty hard for a man his age.

Judd Ramer seemed to read his thoughts, for the man smiled mockingly.

THE next morning Eben's back ached and his eyes burned. He'd gotten very little sleep. He went into the kitchen and Mollie said, "How come you're not down fishing?"

Eben poured himself a glass of sweet milk. He said, "Don't feel like it today."

Mollie eyed him suspiciously. "Something's wrong."

He didn't answer.

As soon as the breakfast crowd thinned out, Eben went down to Halderman's Bar. He wasn't in the habit of entering the place until afternoon, but this morning he felt the need of a drink. He went up to the bar and remembered that yesterday he had stood here and drunk with Tom Gillen. They had sat at one of the green-topped tables and played cards, and the big cowman had laughed and talked about his wife and little girl back home.

Eben swore softly and downed the drink that had been placed before him. Lew Halderman came in off the street and moved up beside Eben. The saloonman's face was drawn and he looked, Eben thought, as if he could stand some rest.

Halderman said, "I sent a wire to Tom's wife last night. They'd been pretty happy, I guess."

Eben swallowed hard. "It's too bad, Lew, but he should have listened to you and put that money in the bank."

Halderman nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "Eben, there was a couple of tough-looking gents in here last night an' some place I got an idea they knowed Ramer. Turned out they didn't, but it set me to wonderin'."

Eben avoided Lew's eyes, pouring himself another drink. He heard the slap of the swinging doors and boots thudded across the floor. Two men moved up to the far end of the bar and Eben ran his eyes over them. They were not men he knew and they were not cattlemen.

Halderman said from the side of his mouth, "Them's the two I was talking about, Eben."

Eben sized them up from the corner of his eye. They were lean, hard-bitten men with eyes that wouldn't stay still. He had seen many of their breed riding the dim trails. He

drained his glass and tried to smile at Halderman.

"You're just imagining things, Lew. They're probably just a couple of saddle bums."

Halderman looked doubtful. "Could be."

He shrugged and Eben went out.

It was hard, sitting behind the cash register during the noon rush. His head ached dully and he wished now that he hadn't taken those drinks down at Lew's place. He couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing and he gave a couple of fellows the wrong change.

He did not go to Halderman's to play cards that afternoon. It was the first time he had missed in over two years, but he just didn't feel up to it. He went into the kitchen and Mollie stared at him, frowning. She said, "You don't look so good. Maybe you ought to go see Doc Beldon."

"Stomach a little upset, I reckon. I'm going to lay down a while."

He did not sleep and finally he got up and went out the back door. He walked along the creek, but he was not aware of its music. He walked far beyond the town and the sun dropped from sight and shadows crossed the creek before he realized it was so late. He cursed himself and began to move faster. Mollie would rake him over the coals for wandering off like this.

It was dark by the time he reached town and they had lit the lamps in the saloons. He hurried down the street and ran into Perry Weatherford, coming out of the doctor's office. The marshal's eyes were troubled and his face was set in harsh lines.

"What's the matter, Perry?" Eben asked.

"Somebody shot Lew Halderman a few minutes ago."

Eben felt as though a giant fist had struck him in the stomach. "Who—what for?"

Weatherford shook his head wearily. "I wish I knew. Lew's in the doc's office, but the doc says he won't be able to talk any tonight."

Eben's legs felt weak and his hands were shaking when he opened the door and went inside. He saw Doc Beldon, drying his hands in a corner of the neat little office, but his eyes did not remain on the medico; they moved on to the couch against the back wall. He stood there in the doorway, a sick look in his eyes and the cold fingers of dread wrapped about his heart.

Doc Beldon came across the room. He put his hand on Eben's shoulder and said, "He's still alive, but I don't know for how long. I've done all I can."

Eben nodded. "I'd like to sit with him a while, Doc."

The medico glanced across the room. "Sure, Eben. I know you and Lew were pretty close—I'll be back in a few minutes."

EBEN crossed the room slowly and sat down on a straight-backed chair beside Lew Halderman. The little saloonman lay very still and his face was colorless. His shirt had been removed and Eben could see the red-stained bandage over his heart.

Eben sat there like a statue, his mouth tight, a deep pain in his eyes. They had been friends for a long time. They had passed some pleasant hours together. And now it looked as if Lew Halderman had served his last drink. Eben figured he wouldn't last till morning.

Eben wet his lips and leaned forward. "Lew, Lew, this is Eben. Can you hear me?"

He kept repeating it over and over until finally the saloonman's eyes opened a little and a groan came past his lips. "Eben—where are you?"

"Right here, Lew. Take it easy."

Halderman's eyes closed again, but his lips kept moving. "Eben, you didn't come down to play cards this afternoon."

Eben's throat was tight and hurting. "I—had something on my mind, Lew."

"Had something on mine, too, Eben. Them two gents I pointed out to you—followed them." His voice became little more than a whisper and Eben had to lean close to catch the words. "Followed them to Ramer's office—heard them talking about killing Tom. My foot hit a tin can and they knew I was outside the window. They chased me down the alley, shooting at me, but—but I got away."

Eben swallowed hard. "You're going to be all right, Lew."

But he was saying something that he didn't believe. Lew wasn't going to be all right—he was going to die.

When the doc came back into the room, Eben left and went out onto the street. There was a drag to his steps as he walked toward the restaurant. He passed people he knew, but he did not see them. The lights were out in the front of the little eating house and he knew that Mollie had closed the place for the night.

The front door was never locked. He opened it and went inside, along the length of the counter and into the kitchen. He heard the creak of Mollie's rocker and he went out onto the back porch. She was busy with her needle and did not look up when he sat down beside her.

He said, "Are you sore at me, Mollie?"

"No," she said. "You've had something on your mind; something that's been bothering you. Did you get it figured out?"

"It's not too easy, Mollie." He waited a minute, then he said, "You know what I was before I met you, Mollie."

"We've been all through that, Eben."

He nodded. "I thought it was all behind me; I'd almost forgot that I was the Brazos



Kid, that I rode with Ben Scodan's Red Mountain gang."

She put the needle down now and looked at him. "What's happened?"

His eyes were bitter. "This new cattle buyer is Judd Scodan, old Ben's son. He's behind the trouble in this town. He or his men shot Lew tonight."

"Then we don't want him in this town, Eben. He'll have to go."

He did not look at her, but kept staring out across the creek. He said, "Judd remembers me, Mollie. If I go to the law, Judd will tell them about me."

If there was emotion in her, it did not show on her face. She picked up her needle again and then she said, "You'll have to work it out."

Eben walked down the dark street of Osceola. He heard the lonesome whistle of a train and he cursed it. The damned railroad was responsible for the trouble in this town. Then he realized that was not so. You couldn't retard the growth of a nation. But you could stop men like Judd Ramer.

Eben came to the cattle buyer's office and saw that a lamp was burning inside. He stepped to the door and opened it without knocking. He entered and saw Ramer, sitting behind a flat-topped desk, intently reading a letter.

The cattle buyer glanced over the top of the piece of paper in his hand. He frowned. "I didn't hear you knock."

Eben ignored that, shuffling forward. There was a queer feeling inside him and he thought, "You're not so young any more, Eben. You've lost your gun savvy and you wouldn't stand a chance in the world against a young buck like Judd."

He stopped then and put his hands down flat on the edge of the desk, looking directly at the cattle buyer. He said, "Judd, Lew was a friend of mine. We got to know one another pretty well in the last ten years. He was a good man, and now he's lying over at the doc's place with a bullet in him, maybe dead."

Ramer put the letter down and his face was expressionless. He said, "What's this got to do with me?"

Eben's eyes did not leave the man's face. "Don't try to cold-deck me," he said. "I knew old Ben and I know you. You buy the Texans' cattle and then you have a couple of boys wait for 'em in an alley and get the money back."

A muscle twitched in the left side of Ramer's face. Something dark and cold crept into his sooty eyes. "You've got it all figured out," he said. "But what good's it going to do you? Go to the law and tell them who I am and I'll drag you into jail with me—don't think I won't."

Eben nodded. "I know that, and I'm hoping I won't have to go to the law."

A faintly puzzled expression crossed Ramer's face. "Then what have you got in mind?"

Eben sighed. "Leave town, Judd. Play your dirty game somewhere else."

Ramer shook his head. "The pickings are too good here."

Eben stood up straight. He said, "You may pull me down with you, Judd, but I'm going through with it if you're not out of town by tomorrow."

"You're bluffing."

"No, I'm serious."

There was a little streak of sweat across Ramer's forehead now and he didn't look so sure of himself. He said, "Why be a fool, Eben? Why toss away your business, everything you've built up in this town? Think of your wife. If you turn me in to the law, what's it going to get you?"

The lamp flickered and Eben watched the shadows leap and dance over the rough pine walls. Then he looked back at Ramer and he said, "I'll be able to go on sleeping with myself."

Ramer made a wry face. "Now, what kind of talk is that?"

"I reckon you wouldn't understand, Judd."

The cattle buyer moved an ink well around on the desk. He said, "No, I guess I wouldn't."

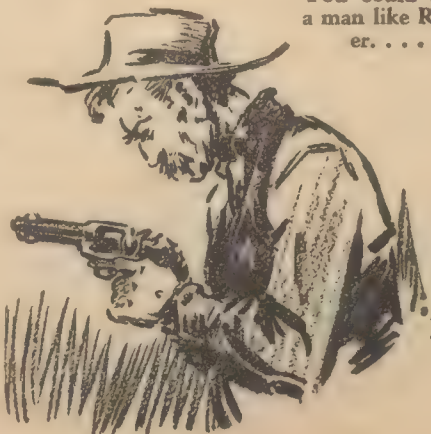
Eben glanced briefly at the backs of his hands. He said, "I reckon there's not much hope for you, Judd. You're all twisted up inside. But I'm hoping you'll think it over; I'm hoping you'll be gone by tomorrow. And those men of yours will have to go too."

"They've already gone, Eben. They got scared when they shot the bartender and high-tailed it out of town."

"And you, Judd?"

*(Continued on page 127)*

You could stop  
a man like Ramer. . . .



*Home and family to Steve Harron meant  
putting blood before bullets—and spill-  
ing it fighting for a man he hated!*

His shot spilled one horse  
and brought a moment's  
floundering confusion. . . .



## CHAPTER ONE

### Boothill Ride

HE STOOD there a full minute, just looking at them, his face masked against his thoughts, his lips curled in a smile that meant nothing. The two Crather boys shifted their weight uneasily and shot a glance at each other.

Steve Harron had known that this was going to happen some day; he had been dreading it. It would mean the end of things for

him, but he said evenly, "Come on. We'll have to tell Hart about it. He's out on the front porch, waiting for breakfast."

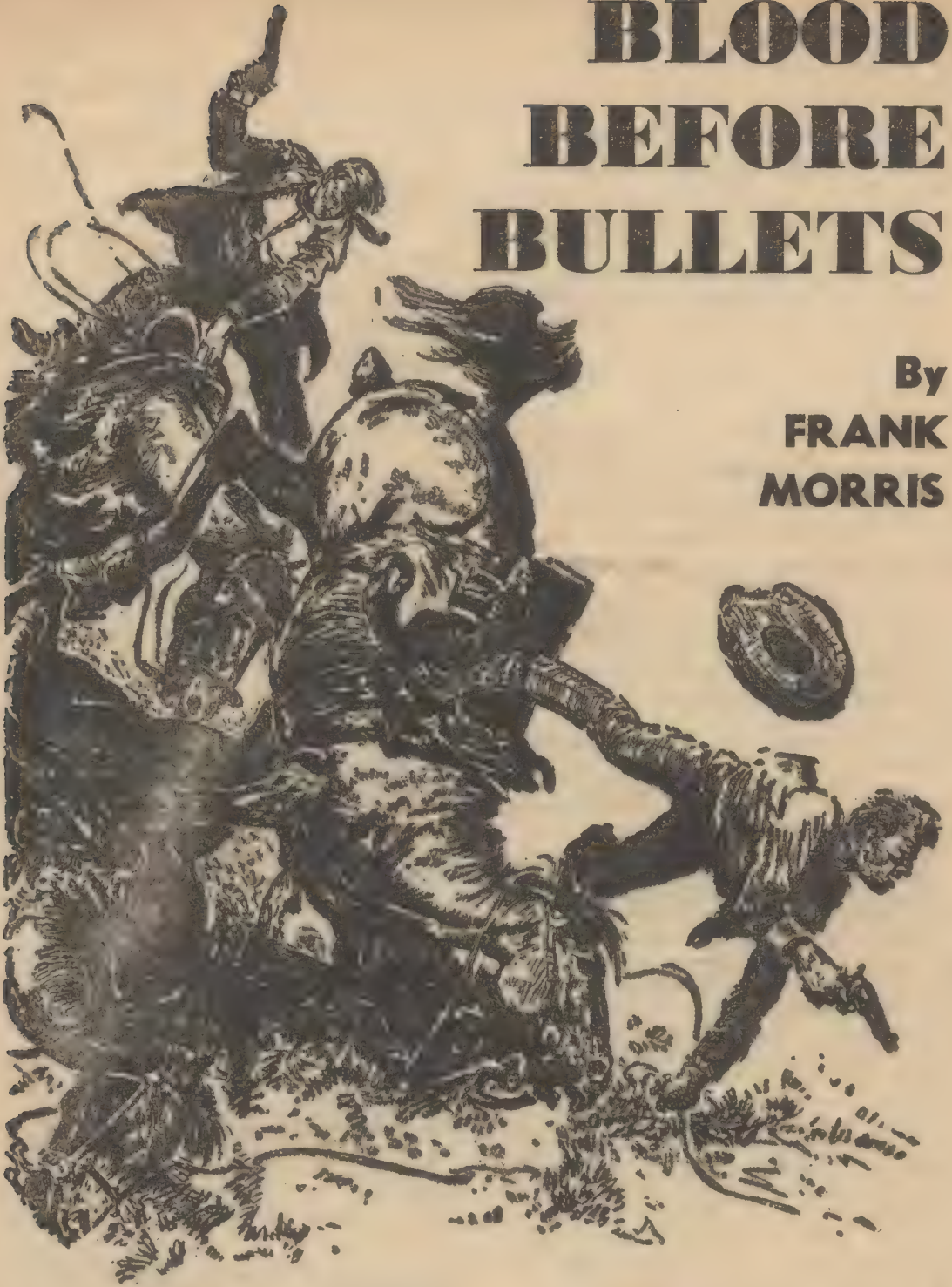
He turned and led the way into the kitchen and Edna Downs, Hart's second wife and Steve's mother, looked up at the three of them.

"Breakfast in a few minutes," she told them, and turned back to the frying bacon. The three made no reply, but kept on through



# BLOOD BEFORE BULLETS

By  
**FRANK  
MORRIS**



the dining room and the front room, and out onto the porch.

Old Hart Downs, the empty left sleeve of his shirt tucked under his belt, sat in the big rocking chair, pulling contentedly at his pipe, feet propped on the split logs that formed a

solid railing around the porch. He was a tall man, but his weight and breadth seemed to dwarf his height and made him appear shorter than he really was. His once dark brown hair was now liberally streaked with silver and added dignity to his weather-seamed face.

Kirk, his only son, sat on the steps at the old man's feet. At the sound of the pounding boots in the room behind them, the two looked up as Bill Crather and his brother, Bert, and Steve Harron filed out onto the porch.

"Huh!" Hart grunted. "Out all night again, gamblin'." He frowned at the two Crathers, his nephews. "How'n hell do you expect to do any work around the ranch if you stay up all night?"

"It's our money—ain't we earned it?" Bill flamed, black eyes glittering like a snake's.

Hart said sharply, "It's your money, an' you're both of age. But it ain't the money so much. We got a ranch to run an' you two've got just as much responsibility in it as the rest of us—"

"Well, it's a good thing we stayed out last night," Bill broke in. He wasn't quite as large as his younger brother, Bert. Both had a faint facial resemblance to old Hart; but there all likeness ceased. They had the black hair and eyes and furtive manner of their gambler father. "We come up the Salt Canyon trail, just at daylight. When we got to this end of the canyon, what you think we found?"

"Dunno," Hart growled, voice tinged with disgust.

Bill said, "We found a four-strand barbed wire fence strung across the mouth of the canyon."

Old Hart came out of his chair. "You mean—"

"I mean that old Dan Morgan has gone an' done what he said he'd do. He's fenced us outa the salt lick."

Hart roared an unaccustomed curse. "I'll—"

"We cut the fence, pulled up a couple of posts, an' let it lay," Bill added.

Kirk got up off the steps, dusted the seat of his levis with a flicking motion of his hand. For a moment he stood looking at Bill and Bert, then at old Hart, his father. He looked a lot like Hart Downs, the same big frame, rugged features, brown eyes and hair. He was Hart's only son by his first wife, who died when Kirk was ten.

"You shouldn't have done that," Kirk said in his slow drawl. "Old man Morgan'll come hightailin' over here, raisin' all kinds of hell. You know, dad, you got the law on your side. The surveyor for the gov'ment told you that your land takes in Salt Canyon, an' you got a deed to it. You oughta mosey into Sand City an' put it plumb up to the sheriff."

"Sheriff, hell!" Bill snapped. "Old man Morgan don't give a hoot for the sheriff. We tore down that fence, an' if he puts it up again, we'll tear it down again. Not only that—"

"An' that'll bring on shootin'," Kirk growled. "An' shootin' means murder an'

that means jail. An' jail's plain hell. I know."

He left it unfinished. They knew the story anyhow. Bill Crather's snaky eyes shifted from Kirk to old Hart.

Steve edged over by the steps, away from Bill and Bert. He'd got some Irish from his father, both in humor and temper. His mood now was between the two.

"Kirk's right," Steve said. "Cuttin' that fence is sure goin' to start trouble."

Bill said, "Huh—the matter with you is old Dan's niece. You cut your grass too danged short and she might not like you."

"I notice you an' Bert don't take to the tall timbers when she sashays down the street, over in Sand City," Steve said.

"Sure, she's a cute little heifer," Bill agreed, a crooked smirk twisting his thin lips. "But I don't let no sleek little filly get in front of me when it comes to poaching on our range—law or not."

Hart said slowly, "I'm kinda like Kirk an' Steve—like to try the law first. If that don't pan out—"

Bert swore. "Not by a damn sight. Bill's right. We gotta plumb stop this before it gets a good start. I say tear down the whole dang fence, an' put a guard there in the canyon to see that it ain't built back again. There's an old line cabin up on the side of the canyon, remember? It's about a hundred yards in from Morgan's end. Me an' Bill can take turns up there, an' see that nobody don't get through to rebuild the fence."

"There'll be a gunfight, sure's you do," Kirk said. "Somebody's goin' to get killed. An' somebody's goin' to jail for it."

"To hell with you both!" Bill snapped, turning on his heel. "I'm hungry as a bitch wolf with fourteen cubs. Let's eat."

Old Hart sighed as he sat down again in the rocking chair. He pulled out a plug of tobacco, stuck it between his knees to hold it while he whittled off some crumbs for his pipe.

"Always trouble, an' more trouble" he muttered.

THE five men presently moved into the dining room. Bert dropped into a seat beside Bill and the others took their places. Bill, his mouth full of bacon, looked across at Steve Harron, a wicked gleam in his black eyes.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Little Stevie thinks cuttin' the fence is goin' to start trouble, eh? It sure will. But don't you worry none, Stevie boy. When we get old Morgan outa the way, we'll look after little Hazel, an' make her like it. Yep, she'll be well taken care of."

Steve jerked to his feet. A red mist of rage hung before his eyes. He started around the



table. "I'll learn you to keep your tongue off Hazel Morgan. She's—"

"Sit down, Steve," old Hart snapped. He reached out and caught Steve by the arm, swung him around. "We can't afford to have no fights among us. We're goin' to need every man we've got if it comes to the showdown with Morgan."

The quiet steady voice of old Hart, more than the words he used, brought reason back to Steve Harron. He stood there a moment, quivering like a horse under a lash, and the red mist dissolved before him. He turned and picked up his chair, still mumbling under his breath. Bill took up the knife and fork he'd dropped and resumed eating, his eyes on his plate.

Edna Downs, over by the stove, threw a sharp glance at Steve. She caught his eye and shook her head. Steve glared at her; then his face softened and his lips twisted into a wry grin.

"I'll break his damn head for him, if he don't keep his mouth shut," he told his mother.

He looked across at Bill, let his eyes swerve to Bert. They weren't just wild and reckless—he figured them bad. Their minds were an inheritance from their father, the sly and cunning instincts of a fox, with natures as merciless and savagely cruel as a predatory wolf's.

Old Hart glanced up through bushy brows. Then, satisfied that Steve was controlling his temper, even though with apparent difficulty, looked back at his plate.

Edna shuffled the frying pan, dished up a platter of eggs and placed them on the table. She turned back to the stove, and glanced out the window. For a moment she stared, then whirled around.

"Hart!" she exclaimed, voice high and sharp. "Look, there's four riders comin' up the trail from Salt Canyon!"

Hart got to his feet ponderously, stepped to the window and looked out.

"Uh-huh," he grunted. "Just as I expected—old man Morgan."

Bill Crather reached for his coffee cup, drained it in one gulp, pushed back his chair, the rest of his breakfast forgotten.

He grated, "Come on, Bert let's get out on the front porch." As he strode through the door he pulled his six-gun, gave the cylinder a whirl, looked at it and slid it back into its holster.

Bert shoved his chair away from the table and got to his feet, throwing a twisted smile over his shoulder at Steve and Kirk. Steve wasn't slow in following. One thing he knew—Bill and Bert were not cowards. Kirk shook his head mournfully, heaved a sigh and followed Steve.

Out on the front porch, old Hart stood at

the top of the steps, the two Crathers on his left, Kirk and Steve on his right. The four riders came on at a canter, the drumming hoofs throwing up little spurts of dust.

OLD HART'S face was grim as he watched Morgan and his men coming along the trail, and thought of all the trouble he'd had, the things he'd been through. Sally Downs, his only sister, marrying that tinhorn gambler—the father of Bill and Bert—the killing of the gambler in a crooked card game. How he had taken Sally and her two youngsters into his own household, with his bride of barely a year and her son, Steve—Pat Harron's boy.

Then came Sally's death—and next Kirk Downs, his only son, was accused of murdering Ed Slinger, an old rancher who lived alone. Motive, robbery. Ed was reputed to keep large sums of money in his shack. He was found with Kirk's knife in his back, the shack ransacked, and the money gone. Kirk was tried and convicted, although he claimed to be innocent. He claimed, too, he had lost his knife the day before the murder. But he had been seen riding in the vicinity of the Slinger shack on the day of the murder, and the jury had found him guilty. Kirk had gotten away with a prison sentence, but he had been marred for life.

When trouble sought out a man it had a way of snowballing—there was no way at telling how much Morgan's actions were dictated by what had gone before.

"Don't you start nothin, Bill, you an' Bert," old Hart said. "Let me do the talkin'. An' you, Kirk, an' Steve. But if things do start, remember it's Morgan's hired gunmen that are dangerous. Get them first, or they'll get you."

The four riders swung to a stop a scant dozen yards in front of the porch. Morgan, big, heavy-set, with light sandy hair and cold blue eyes, reined his horse out a few feet in advance of his men, and a little to one side. For a moment he sat there, eyeing the men on the porch.

Dan Morgan was a stubborn man and he was arrogant with the arrogance of the ignorant and the strong-minded. He had his pride, too—not pride of appearance or integrity, but pride of power, position and wealth.

"I haven't come huntin' trouble, Downs," he addressed Hart, voice rasping a little through his nose, "but I told you to keep your stock off my land."

"My stock don't go on your land, Morgan" Hart said flatly.

"They go into Salt Canyon, an' that's part of my land," Morgan snapped. "I'm tired of it, an' I'm through tellin' you about it. Yesterday I had a fence put up across this end of

the canyon, but this mornin' I find it torn down. You or some of your men tore it down."

"Yeah, me an' Bert come up from Sand City last night along the Salt Canyon trail," Bill spoke up before Hart could answer, "an' we run into the fence. We tore it down. That canyon's—"

"Wait a minute, Bill," Hart interrupted him. "Morgan's talkin' to me, not to you. We went over that."

"I just wanted him to know who done it," Bill sneered.

"I didn't know nothin' about the fence, Morgan," Hart said, "until Bill an' Bert here come in this mornin' an' told me."

Hart spoke calmly, unruffled, his tone almost friendly. Steve watched him, listened to his words, and marveled. Hart Downs was not a man to tuck his tail like a kicked cur and slink away and he wasn't trying to side-step the issue. Steve wondered just what he was driving at.

"Well, you know about it now," Morgan rumbled, "an' you'd better build it back where them young hellions tore it down."

Hart said, "That fence is on my land, an' I don't want no fence there. You can fence the other end, if you want to, but Salt Canyon is included in the survey given me by the gov'ment, an' I mean to keep it."

Morgan's eyes began to blaze, and he reined his horse back a few feet until he was even with his men. "Salt Canyon always has been on my land, an' I ain't goin' to give it up now to you or any other damned law-spoutin' squatter."

Bill Crather snarled, "There ain't goin' to be no fence on this end of Salt Canyon, you can bet on that."

"I have a clear deed to my land," Hart said firmly. "If you claim part of the land in that survey, then it's up to you to take it into court an' let the judge decide whose land it is."

"Court, hell!" Morgan roared. "What've I got to do with the courts? That land's mine, an' I'm goin' to keep it."

The three men with Morgan had been sitting quietly on their horses, watching with alert eyes. Theirs was no part of the argument; their job was fighting. Steve Harron, as he kept a watchful eye on Morgan's men, felt the hair prickle on the back on his neck as the argument waxed hotter. Hired killers like these were quite capable of shooting down old Hart and the rest of them without provocation or cause. All they needed was a nod from Morgan, or some untoward move by one of the men on the porch. When Bill slapped at his gun, the man on Morgan's right, apparently thinking Bill was going to draw, grabbed for his gun.

STEVE was too fast for him. His hand dipped, came up and his gun roared. The killer's six-gun jumped through the air as if it had been batted away by some invisible giant.

Then the other two Morgan men went for their guns. Bill and Bert dropped to the porch floor behind the log railing, Steve and Kirk dropped on the other side. For a split second Hart stood staring; then he, too, dropped behind the railing beside Steve, six-gun kicking in his hand.

Two of Morgan's men wheeled to the right; the other, with Morgan, turned left. Morgan kept going. Flat over the pommel of his saddle, he fed spurs to his mount, leaving his hired gunmen to fight it out.

Bill and Bert poured hot lead at the three men, a light of fiendish glee in their faces. Hart, Steve, and Kirk also were throwing all they had at the men on the horses.

One of the men was swaying in his saddle. His companion on that side swung in beside him and pulled him over on the saddle in front of him. He turned sideways, threw a parting shot at the men on the porch, then roweled his mount and sped away, carrying the wounded man with him.

The third gunman wheeled his horse to follow after the other two. Bill Crather rose up from behind the logs, took careful aim at the fast moving figure, and squeezed the trigger. The escaping horseman jerked, slumped, and grabbed his saddle-horn. He swayed drunkenly, but managed to hang on. The one riderless horse snorted, tossed its head, and loped after the others, stirrups slapping.

A little cloud of dust away down the trail by the bridge showed where Morgan was still fleeing. He looked back, saw his men stringing out after him, and pulled up to wait for them beyond pistol shot. Morgan helped load the wounded man on the riderless horse, then the small cavalcade crossed the bridge and on down the trail toward the canyon.

"Well, that was short an' sweet," Bill Crather said.

"Yeah, but that sure ain't the end of it," Bert answered. "Old Dan'll be wild now. Bill—you an' me better get down to that line shack an' stand guard. The old devil's goin' to get home, round up his bunch, an' come back like a mad bull. He can raise twenty gunslingers, or more, if he wants to. An' he'll want to."

"Looked to me like one of them jaspers cashed in," Kirk said, his voice worried. "You fellers better keep outa sight a while, or the sheriff'll—"

"Why us any more'n you?" Bill Crather snapped. "We was all shootin' at 'em. How do we know which one hit him? Might've



been you or Steve, or Bert or me, or Uncle Hart. Come on, Bert. We got work to do."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hell's Canyon

A HALF hour later Steve was out in the barn when old Hart came out and joined him.

"We oughta have some more supplies, Steve," the oldster said. "I was talkin' to Edna just now, an' we're kinda low on some things. Could be we won't get to town if Morgan an' his men go on the tear. Mebbe you oughta hitch up an' go to town an' get us some things. Edna's makin' up a list of what we need."

"All right," Steve agreed.

Hart went back into the house, and Steve hitched the span of bays to the light wagon. He went into the kitchen and Edna gave him the list she had prepared, then he got in the wagon and headed for Sand City, five miles away.

He wouldn't have to go by way of Salt Canyon. The road to town lay more to the east, went a little south of and around the ridge through which Salt Canyon ran. The road through the canyon was a little shorter, but the road around the ridge was more level, better for a wagon. It was still early, and the bays trotted along contentedly.

Steve slapped the lines on the broad backs and frowned. It was going to be a tough fight, with Morgan able to bring a score or more of gunmen on his side. Maybe he ought to see the sheriff while he was in town. He wished he'd thought to mention that to old Hart before he left and was a little surprised Hart hadn't brought it up. Maybe the old man was more stiff-necked than he'd thought.

This trouble with Morgan, though—how was it going to affect him and Hazel? He wished he could see Hazel and talk to her, explain just how things were. At least, he could present his side of the argument, Hart's side of it. Dan Morgan was a bull-headed old devil. When he got an idea set in his mind, all hell couldn't change it.

It was an hour before noon when Steve rolled down the main street of Sand City. It wasn't much of a town as to size. The business part was only two blocks long, with false-fronted buildings lining both sides of the street. Around this, along the side streets were scattered residences, with little gardens and flowers, and down along the southern side flowed Turpentine Creek, from which the town got its water supply.

There were an even dozen saloons, one church, a livery stable, a blacksmith's shop, a harness shop, a two-story hotel, two general

stores, and various other business places. Steve went into Brown's Emporium, where Hart always traded, and gave the list to old man Brown.

"Kinda stockin' up a little, eh?" Brown said, as his eye ran down the list.

"Yeah," Steve admitted. He said no more.

He left the Emporium and walked down the boardwalk to Quong Sing's café and ate his noonday meal. Later he stood on the boardwalk, rolling a smoke. He passed Minnie's Bonnet Shop, when the door opened and Hazel Morgan stepped out, to stand there face to face with him. He was the first to speak.

"Hello, Hazel," he said and took off his hat. "I'm awfully glad to see you. Been wantin' to have a little talk with you."

"There's nothing for us to talk about," Hazel said and her eyes held a hard glint. "Not after what happened out at your ranch this morning."

"That wasn't my fault," Steve said soberly. "It doesn't have anything to do with you an' me, anyhow. At least, it shouldn't."

"But it does," Hazel tossed her head and the black curls jiggled and danced under the brim of her white Stetson. Her divided riding skirt was buckskin-fringed, and she wore a soft black-and-white calfskin jacket over the blue silk waist. Her face was a delicate oval, with large black eyes and full red lips. Her nose was straight and small.

"I can't help it if Hart an' Dan Morgan can't agree on their boundary lines," Steve said. "An' I don't see why—"

"You're the one that fired the first shot," Hazel accused. "You started it."

"I had to do it, or see Bill Crather get shot," Steve told her doggedly. "One of Morgan's men started to draw on him. All I done was shoot the gun outa his hand—I could just as easy have killed him. Then the others began shootin' at us, an' we had to shoot back or get killed. You mean we should've just stood there an' let them shoot us down?"

Steve's temper began to flare. His eyes blazed and his voice grew hard. Hazel's eyes gleamed and her lips flattened into a thin line.

"You see," she said. "You flare up and get mad, even just talking about it."

It was unreasonable enough to tone down Steve's anger. "What about Dan Morgan? He was pretty mad when I saw him."

"Yes, Uncle Dan is stubborn, too, stiff-necked and hot-headed. But Uncle Dan has always considered that Salt Canyon is on his land—why should he give it away to Hart Downs or anybody else?"

"But it's not on his land," Steve insisted. "The survey shows that it's on Hart's land. Besides, what's all this got to do with us?"

"Everything," Hazel said decidedly. "Uncle Dan isn't the most lovable person in the world, but he's still my uncle. In his way he's been good to me. I certainly owe him loyalty—at least until this is settled."

He put his hands on her shoulders, looked deep into her eyes. She didn't draw away. People were looking at them, and a little color crept into her face and the warmth of her tingled up his fingers.

"It ain't goin' to be straightened out," he said softly. "It's goin' to bring up a gunfight, an' a lot of men are goin' to get killed. Maybe your uncle, maybe me, maybe—"

"Oh, Steve—no!" Hazel's face had suddenly paled. "I—"

Steve said, trying to keep calm, "After a while they'll lose sight of the land, the thing that started all the trouble. It becomes a matter of kill or get killed, just as soon as one of them goes for his gun. What would you want me to do? Leave my people an' come over on Dan Morgan's side?"

Hazel stared at him and her eyes took on and angry glint. "No!" she jerked out. "I've never thought you a traitor, Steve Harron—nor of myself as the kind of woman who'd ask you to be one." Then the fire died out of her eyes. "We'll just have to wait, Steve, till it's all over. But I'm afraid, Steve—I'm scared."

She turned suddenly on her heel and walked away from him, going up the boardwalk toward the livery stable. Steve stood where he was and watched her disappear through the wide doors.

He couldn't blame her, he thought; she was right. She had her pride and her integrity, her loyalties—even as he had his.

Ten minutes longer he waited before he saw her come out, mounted. As she went by she looked at him without smiling. He raised his hat, sat it back on his head, and she barely nodded an acknowledgment.

"Damn!" he said, and turned into Brown's Emporium.

"Purt' near ready," Brown said, and grinned his snaggle-tooth grin. "That stack back there; you can begin to tote it out to your wagon, if you want to. Check it against the list as you go."

Steve loaded the goods, checked them against the list, but his mind wasn't on it.

THE sun was down below the horizon when Steve got back and long shadows were pushing out over the land. He unhitched the bays and put them in their stalls, gave them hay and grain. Kirk came out to help him unload and carry in the supplies.

"Anything new?" Steve asked.

"Not a thing," Kirk said. "Bert come in and got his dinner, an' took some back to

Bill. Said so far they hadn't seen a thing."

Shortly after they had finished unloading, Bill came in for his supper, and said he'd take back enough for Bert. He didn't say anything to Steve, but the latter caught a sly look and a sour grin.

By the time supper was finished, darkness had covered the ranch, and Bill went back to the line-shack. Steve went up to the top of the windmill from where he'd have a good chance to see anything moving between the house and the canyon.

It was along about eleven o'clock that he saw the reflection of the fire behind the ridge. He called down to the house, and both Kirk and Hart answered. In a minute or two they were out in the yard, and Steve pointed out the reflection of the blaze against the lightly clouded sky.

"Somethin' sure caught on fire over there," he said. "Wonder what it is."

"Looks like maybe a haystack," Kirk said. "Reckon them two damned hellions have sneaked in there an' set things on fire?"

"Wouldn't put it past 'em," Hart snorted. "I'll ride on down to the bridge," Kirk said. "They'll probably come hightailin' back to the ranch purty soon, with a gang of Morgan's men on their heels."

Kirk took his horse out of the corral, threw a saddle on it, and rode off into the night. Steve climbed back to the top of the windmill. There was no moon, and the stars gave only a dim light, but he could see Kirk's darker shadow moving along the trail. When the night swallowed him, he could still hear Kirk's horse thudding across the little bridge. Maybe he intended to wait there; there wouldn't be much use to go on closer to the canyon.

Time dragged on, and Hart went back into the house. After a while the back door opened again, and Steve saw his step-father sit on the steps and light his pipe.

It was fully an hour past midnight when he saw two riders come pounding up the trail from Salt Canyon. For a long moment he gazed at them intently, then decided they were Bill and Bert and hurried to the ground. He walked over to the corral gate, stood watching the riders whirl into the yard.

"Where's Uncle Hart?" Bill asked, as he slid from the saddle.

"Here I am," Hart answered from the dark recesses of the back porch. He got up and walked toward them. "What happened?"

"Hell of a lot!" Bill laughed jerkily. "What've you two young hellions been up to?" Hart demanded.

"We fixed Morgan," Bill rasped. "We done give him something to do besides comin' over here to raise hell. He was fixin' to come over here an' burn us up. We just got to him



first—we shot lighted arrows into his haystacks an' barns."

"I might've knowed you'd play hell!" Hart rumbled.

"What the hell do you care?" Bill snarled. "He'd've come anyhow. As it is, we done—"

"Where's Kirk?" Steve suddenly broke in. "He left here right after we saw that fire. Said he was goin' to the bridge, thought mebbe you an' Bert might be in a tight spot an' need help."

"The damn fool!" Bill growled. "We was dustin' outa the canyon ahead of Morgan's men, when Kirk comes lopin' down the canyon in front of us. I thought it was one of Morgan's men, that had somehow worked around us, tryin' to flank us, head us off. It was dark an' I couldn't see it was Kirk—"

"You mean," old Hart yelled, "that you shot Kirk?"

"I thought he was one of Morgan's—"

"You thought hell!" Hart exploded.

The old man was in a towering rage. His eyes blazed, and he raised his one clenched fist over his head and took a step toward Bill. Bert dived forward, trying to intercept the old man, but he was too slow. Bill side-stepped, whipped out his gun, and laid the barrel along the side of the old man's head. Hart crumpled, his knees buckled, and he doubled to the ground as Bill slid the gun back in its holster.

Steve stood at one side, staring wide-eyed, hardly able to believe what he saw. Anger was a knot in his chest—he hadn't thought Bill would hit the old man, even if Hart had struck him. But to knock out the oldster, to gun-whip him, was to Steve Harron something unthinkable.

Then he found the two Crathers facing him. Steve stood with hands hanging loosely at his sides. He seemed to feel the impact of Bill Crather's evil stare, and a little shiver of revulsion chased up and down his spine. He caught the fain flicker of a sneering smile on Bill's swarthy face.

"You damn fool!" Bill jerked out. "You're next, Steve."

Bill's hand was still on his gun butt. He attempted to swing it up, while Bert clawed for the gun on his hip. Steve's hands blurred desperately and there were two spurts of flame. The two Crathers slammed back, their feet knocked out from under them.

Steve kicked their six-guns away and stood back, looking down at them. He felt cold inside, despite his anger. He'd known this would happen some day, but now that it had, he felt bitterness.

Edna came running from the house, screaming. She ran to Hart, lifted his gory head in her arms. Steve leaned over and peered sharply through the gloom.

"He's just knocked out," he said. "He'll

be all right in a few minutes. Here, I'll help you carry him inside."

"But—but Bill and Bert?"

Steve told her, "Had their legs kicked out from under them." He turned his head and looked at the two Crathers, lying cursing on the ground. He turned back to Hart. "They won't be able to walk soon," he growled, "but they won't die. They had no business hittin' dad."

Together they managed to get Hart into the kitchen. Steve propped him up in a chair, took a wet rag and washed his face. The old man snorted, gasped, caught his breath and looked around with bleary eyes.

"Wh-what—" he spluttered.

"You're all right now," Steve said. "Give him a half a glass of whiskey, mother, an' he'll be as good as new. I'm goin' after Kirk. Better keep an eye peeled, dad."

HE WENT out, threw a kak on his horse, and started at a dead run down the Salt Canyon trail. Things had happened too fast for thought, but now he once more remembered the fire—and Hazel. Had the fire reached the main house? The thought sent a cold chill up Steve's spine.

It was slightly more than a mile to the bridge, and another mile from there to the canyon. At the rate Steve was traveling it didn't take long to reach it. About a hundred yards inside, the canyon made a sharp bend, and Steve hadn't quite reached it when he heard the roar of a gun.

He reined his horse in sharply and sat there a full minute, straining his ears and eyes. The dull boom of an occasional six-gun reached him, coming from farther inside the canyon.

He wheeled over to the right behind a clump of oaks and some boulders. Here he stepped down and tossed the reins over a low-hanging limb. Gun in hand, he crept around the bend. He saw the flame of a gun a couple of hundred yards farther in. But the flame streaked up the canyon, not in his direction. Answering shots came from still farther on, and from the other side of the canyon.

It was black night here between the high walls, and Steve couldn't see the men doing the shooting. But the fact that one lone man was shooting at five or six others told him the story. He figured that Kirk was the lone man near him, holding back Morgan's men. The attackers were afraid to come on, not knowing how many they had to face.

On hands and knees, crawling from rock to low bush, taking advantage of every scrap of cover, silently as an Indian, Steve inched toward the lone fighter. When he had reached a point fairly close to the concealed man, he called out.

"Kirk!"

"Yeah?" came the cautious answer.

"It's me—Steve. You hurt?"

"Damned near scalped, is all," Kirk said grimly. Steve began crawling forward again. "Bill or Bert took a shot at me. Reckon they didn't know who I was in the dark. Creased me. I come to purty pronto, though, crawled over here an' holed up. My horse's back there somewhere."

"I'll get him," Steve said. "You able to ride?"

"I—I reckon. I can make a good try."

After about ten minutes, Steve found Kirk's horse and made his way back to where Kirk crouched behind the boulder.

"Think you can crawl back some? I'll help you up into the saddle."

"Sure, I can make it," Kirk answered stoutly. But Steve knew his answer was forced, that he had doubts that he could make it.

"I'll stay here an' keep them hombres occupied," he said. "You get on back there, but don't try to get in the saddle by yourself. I'll be with you in a minute. My horse is just around the bend from yours. I'll get you on, we'll make a break for it. Mebbe they won't catch on till we're well on the way."

"Uh-huh," Kirk grunted, and started crawling.

Steve looked across to where Morgan's men were holed up. He moved around to the other side of the boulder, threw a shot at them. Four bullets came whining at the place where he'd been. He darted to the other side of the boulder, threw another shot. Then he jumped to another big rock a dozen yards away, let loose another shot.

Bullets began to fly all about him, chipped rocks and dust showered over him. Steve darted from place to place, throwing lead at the flashes of the other guns. A piece of rock as large as his fist flew into the air, hit him a glancing blow on the side of the head. He almost went down, and for a moment everything turned black, whirled madly.

He grabbed onto the boulder, steadied himself, wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. He choked back the grunt that pain brought to his tight lips, but couldn't entirely stifle it.

Another moment and his head cleared a little. He sent more shots at the blazing guns. Kirk should have had time to reach his horse by now. Steve triggered four shots in quick succession, then turned and ran as best he could and with as little noise as possible.

Then he reached Kirk and the horse. Another moment and he boosted Kirk into the saddle, handed up the reins, and the horse headed out of the canyon. Steve jumped around the bend, found his horse where he'd left it and swung into the saddle.

Steve Harron's jaw tightened. He leaned across his saddle horn and urged his mount to a swifter pace. The roar of guns, the wild high yells still came from down the canyon. They wouldn't hear the pound of the horses' hoofs through all that noise.

They made it to the entrance of the canyon with no sign of pursuit behind them. Maybe Morgan's men hadn't figured things out yet. But they would, and Steve pulled alongside of Kirk.

"Hang on, feller. It'll be a tight race," Steve warned.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Devils of Salt Canyon

STEVE was right. They were barely a quarter of a mile out from the canyon when Morgan's men came spewing out behind them. He pulled the Winchester from its saddle boot, levered a shell into the firing chamber. He slowed his mount, turned in the saddle and pulled the trigger. Morgan's men were coming on fast, closely bunched, trying to cut down the distance to get within hand gun range. His shot spilled one horse and produced a moment's floundering confusion.

Steve laid a quirt across the rump of Kirk's horse and fed spurs to his own.

The horses pounded up the trail, and as they crossed the log bridge over the stream, the sounds of pursuit had faded. Steve thought Morgan's men might have given up the chase and turned back into the canyon, headed for their ranch.

Steve and Kirk made it to the corral without further hindrance. Steve helped Kirk down out of the saddle, held him by the arm as they went toward the house. Bill and Bert had been taken into the house.

Edna met them at the kitchen door.

Kirk grunted, "Just creased. Lots of blood, an' I feel like a goldurn Indian had scalped me. But I'll be all right."

Edna flitted to the stove. There was a rattle of pans, and in a moment she was back with a big washpan full of water. She placed it on the bench by the kitchen door, and beckoned to Kirk.

"Here, let me wash your head," she said.

Under Edna's skillful fingers, it wasn't long till Kirk was washed and bandaged. A clean shirt, a cup of hot coffee, followed by a shot of whiskey, and he looked a lot better.

"Feelin' a heap better, too," he grinned.

"Where's Bill an' Bert?" Steve asked.

"They dragged themselves into the bunk-house," Edna answered. "I went out to help them, but they wouldn't let me."

Steve muttered, "How is dad?"



"All right—he'll have to be quiet a spell."

"Think you an' Kirk can hold things down in here while I go an' keep watch?" Steve asked.

"Sure, go ahead," Kirk said. Now that things had come to a head there was nothing wrong with his nerve.

Steve went to the corral where he had left the horses, unsaddled Kirk's horse and turned it into the enclosure. He refilled the magazine of his Winchester, put it back in the boot, and swung up. He rode down toward the log bridge.

He looked toward the east, but it would be an hour before the light got any better. He'd have to deperen on his ears rather than his eyes. He dismounted, tied the reins to the railing and rolled a smoke.

For a while he leaned against the end post of the bridge, listening. The only sounds were the low gurgling of the water in the stream below, the monotonous chirp of a cricket hidden under a chip somewhere down in the tall grass, the mournful howl of a lonesome coyote away off in the distance. Once or twice a tree owl hooted.

Steve shook himself, took a turn along the trail and wished daylight would come, so he could see. He jerked erect, ears straining. Was that the soft plunk of a hoof in the sandy trail out there? He caught the sound again, far off, and was sure. Something was moving along the trail down there between the bridge and the canyon.

His shoulders straightened; he felt almost relieved. He dropped to his heels, trying to get as much of the trail against the skyline as possible. Dimly, he thought, he saw something moving. Maybe his eyes played him false. Then he made out four moving blotches of darker shadow.

Only four? It wasn't enough—Morgan could muster five times that many. They would come in force. Steve squatted there, straining into the darkness, trying to see if there were more behind the first bunch. But four was all he could make sure of, and they were so dim and indistinct he could scarcely be sure of them. They came on almost without sound, the soft sand muffling their hoofbeats.

Steve came to his feet, stood motionless for a moment. Then a humorless grin twisted the corners of his mouth. The idea that came to him suggested a way to finish this tonight, one way or another.

Steve laid his Winchester across the bridge rail, sighted well below the dim outline of a man's head and shoulders, and slowly squeezed the trigger. A streak of orange flame lanced the darkness, the whip-like crack came bounding back from the hills. He hoped the shot would warn Hart and Kirk—and Bill and Bert, if they were still able to hear.

At the crack of the gun, the head and shoulders disappeared, a horse screamed in pain. Steve grasped his rifle tightly, wheeled and swung to his horse.

He came pounding into the ranch yard, skidded to a halt and stepped down. He turned the horse into the corral, still saddled, and dived for the heavy log house at the foot of the windmill. That would be the best place, with heavy logs from behind which he could pour hot lead at the invaders.

Halfway across the yard, he saw what he'd expected at the bridge—a bright light sprang up from the haystacks a hundred yards to the south of the corral. That was why he had seen only four men coming up the trail. They were a decoy, while the main force slipped around to the rear and set fire to the haystacks. He swore softly.

A moment later he was inside the well house. From here he could see the now brightly flaming haystacks, and several men around them. He laid his Winchester across the sill of the small window and squeezed the trigger. One of the men whirled completely around, stumbled and fell. The other men dived from sight.

The roar of guns, wild yells, still came from the canyon.



Then the tool shed caught fire, then the bunkhouse. More of Morgan's men were over there. Steve could hear Bill and Bert open up a roaring chorus of six-guns, with the heavy boom of old Hart's buffalo gun from the house playing bass. He grinned—they hadn't kept the old man down for long. Then light from the burning buildings illumined the yard like a full moon.

A steady stream of lead came from the ranch house, the bunkhouse and the well house. Steve fired slowly, deliberately, trying to make each shot count. Soon several dark forms dotted the ranch yard, and Morgan's men fell back and took cover, counting on the fire to drive the defenders into the open.

THE bunkhouse was now a seething mass of flames at the far end. Bill and Bert came crawling out, guns blazing. They got as far as the corral fence, against which they propped their backs. Shots were kicking up dust and jerking splinters from the corral rails around them.

Steve could see them through the little window. Bert was slumped on one elbow now, shoulder up against a post, and his gun was taking a grim toll of the attackers. Bill had his back against another post, a gun in each hand, firing first one and then the other. In front and on the sides they had no protection.

Bert coughed and slumped over on his face, gun falling from his lifeless hand. Steve could see Bill's lips moving, could almost hear his steady stream of curses. He seemed to bear a charmed life.

Steve's rifle clicked on an empty chamber. He dropped it and drew his six-guns. He thought he saw Morgan jump from behind the tool shed, making for the rear of the barn. He threw a shot at him, and the man's hat jumped into the air.

Suddenly Steve found his well house had caught fire. He leaped outside, dived for the corral fence and ran around one end of it. Morgan's men made a break for their horses, old Dan at their head. They'd had enough. They wheeled their mounts and turned to flee—only to be met with a withering fire from a line of charging riders coming up the Salt Canyon trail.

Steve saw them and yelled. Morgan, in the lead of his men, bore the brunt of that scathing volley that poured into their ranks, emptying saddles. Morgan jerked, twisted around in his saddle and plunged head-first to the ground, a bullet through his brain. The remainder of the men tried to turn back, made a break to reach the questionable protection afforded by the burning buildings. . . .

Fifty men came pouring into the yard,

headed by the sheriff. The three Morgan men left alive raised their hands in surrender. The dawn, unnoticed, lighted the scene, blending with the red glare from the burning buildings. Hart and Kirk came running from the ranch house, and Steve stepped out from behind the corral.

From down the trail came the thud of pounding hoofs, and in the growing light Steve saw the lone rider, black hair flying loose behind her. The horse pounded into the yard, to come to a sliding halt.

He caught Hazel as she slid from the saddle, stood holding her as she swayed against him, crying a little.

"I—tried to get the sheriff and his men here in time to stop it—"

Steve nodded soberly. "Morgan's men fired at the posse—reckon not many of them could afford meetin' up with a sheriff. Too bad about Morgan—"

He felt his grip on her loosening for some reason, sensed a blackness forming about his vision. It was only then that he realized that he'd been hit.

He sat down, then stretched out, and was dimly conscious of the bustle about him. . . .

When his vision cleared he found his arm and face bandaged—and Sheriff Fullbright standing beside him. Others were there too—except Bill and Bert Crather.

The sheriff said, "Had some other business here, too—got a letter yesterday from a sheriff down in Texas. He told me about the killing of that old hermit rancher down there, Ed Slinger."

Kirk said, his face paling at the sheriff's words, "But I done time for that killin'—an' I didn't kill old Ed. Him an' me was good friends."

"That's what the sheriff down there wrote me. He says he arrested a Mexican there some weeks ago. The Mexican, tryin' to make things easier for himself, told the sheriff he knew all about the killin' of Ed Slinger, said he saw it done. He said Bill Crather done it."

Hart swore. Kirk made a strangling sound in his throat, and stood up. The sheriff stood with him.

"Hold on, Kirk," he said. "I come to arrest him, but it's too late even for that. He jest died a few minutes ago. Him an' his brother, too."

Steve turned his face away—and his eyes met those of Hazel, kneeling on the other side of him. Somehow, he found, her hand had come to nestle in his. There wasn't anything either one of them could say—but looking at her he could feel a sense of contentment beginning to form within him.

The devils of Salt Canyon were stilled forever.



## GUN GHOSTS NEVER DIE

(Continued from page 115)

The cattle buyer picked the ink well up and appeared to study it. He said, "You really need to go through with it?"

"I'm not kidding, Judd."

Ramer set the ink well down and his breath came past his lips in a long sigh. He slid down in his chair a little and spread his hands in a futile gesture. He said heavily, "Then I guess I'll have to leave."

**E**BEN STORM went out into the cool night air and he could hear the bawling of many cattle. He knew the sound came from the stock pens across the tracks on the edge of town. He crossed the street, wondering if Ramer had been putting on an act back there, if the man would really leave town without any trouble.

Eben came to Doc Beldon's office and decided to stop a minute. He went in and found the man of medicine pouring a thick, dark liquid into a water glass. Eben glanced at the couch against the wall. "How is he, doc?"

The medico turned. He was heavy-eyed, but he smiled faintly. "He's better, Eben—resting easy now. I think he'll be good as new in a few days."

Eben went out, feeling as though something dark and heavy had dropped from him. He turned toward home and there was no drag to his steps now. He saw two people sitting on the porch of the Osceola Hotel. They were in the shadows, but he was sure they were Perry Weatherford and Cora Leeds. Eben smiled and moved on.

He reached the restaurant and went in through the front door. He walked through the darkness into the kitchen. He could hear the sound of Mollie's breathing and knew that she was asleep back in the living quarters. He glanced at the big wood stove and shook his head. He guessed his wife was getting absent-minded. There was still fire in the stove and the pan of grease that was used for frying potatoes hadn't been removed from the back hole.

Eben started across the room and then a sound from behind him caused the little hairs on the back of his neck to crawl. He whirled in time to see a dark shape lunge at him. He glimpsed an arching gun butt and he felt a man's hot breath in his face. He ducked and the gun missed him by inches. He staggered back and the man came after him, swinging the gun savagely, trying, Eben knew, to kill him. He couldn't get a good look at the man, but he knew, without being told, that it was Ramer. The cattle buyer was desperate now; he did not want to leave this town.

Without knowing how he'd come by it, Eben

# THIS FREE BOOK

## Tells how we can teach you QUICKLY & EASILY TO MOUNT BIRDS AND ANIMALS

### GAME HEADS, FISH

Send at once for this fascinating free book which tells how you can learn to be a taxidermy artist. Save and preserve your beautiful hunting trophies. Decorate your den. A grand hobby for sportsmen, hunters, anglers—both men and boys! **DOUBLE** your fun from hunting and fishing. We teach you this marvelous art right in your own home, by mail, in your spare time. Also, we teach you to make strong, useful **GENUINE LEATHER** from hides. **Act RIGHT NOW.**

**SEND TODAY!** Rush a letter or penny postcard for the beautifully illustrated 68-page **FREE BOOK**. Full of fascinating game pictures. Learn about this old reliable school for outdoorsmen. 48 years in business. More than 400,000 students. No cost or obligation for the book. **BE SURE TO STATE YOUR AGE!**

**NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY**  
3369 Elwood Building - OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

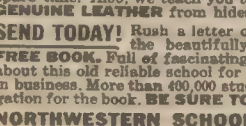


TAXIDERMY

FUN • PROFIT RECREATION

## FREE BOOK







MAKE YOUR OWN LEATHER

## AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. \$6



**Inside Trade Information On:**

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—Skiways—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lay floor—How to paint



**AUDELS, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.**  
Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days free trial. If OK I will remit \$1 in 7 days and \$1 monthly until \$6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

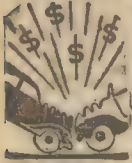
Name

Address

Occupation

Employed by  PER

## Get into Good Paying AUTO BODY and FENDER WORK



**BIG DEMAND in Auto Body and Fender work.** Start training now in your spare time at home for good pay work. Practical shop experience included. U. E. I. Training covers metal work, welding, painting, etc. Placement service—or we will show you how to start your own shop. Behind U. E. I. TRAINING is a large national organization founded 1927. Write today for FREE FACTS—No obligation.

Approved  
for Training  
under G.I. Bill

AUTO-CRAFTS  
DIVISION  
2523 SHEFFIELD AVE., DEPT. X-9AD, CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS

**UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE**  
2523 SHEFFIELD AVE., DEPT. X-9AD, CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS

Quack!

### THE NEW ORIGINAL DRINKING DUCK



Quack!

only **\$2.49** WITH THE BIG EYES AND REAL FEATHER TAIL AND STAND

**POSTPAID** This amazing new duck will fascinate young and old with his antics. No motor, no electricity, no springs. He just quizzos. Also Electric Light Box Tie Complete with Battery and Bulbs, \$1.95 postpaid. Unique Xmas Presents! Rush your order today.

**BERNARD FINE CO., INC.**

501 Sixth Ave., Dept. PB1, New York 24, N. Y.

### EARN EXTRA CASH— WITHOUT LEAVING YOUR OWN HOME

#### Show High-Quality, Guaranteed Housewares

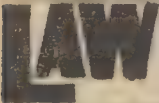
No sales experience necessary. Simply take orders, collect your commissions—we do the rest. Our salespeople earn \$20 to \$50 every week by showing our fine aluminum ware and other fast-selling things to friends and neighbors. Complete sales material sent free by return mail, without obligation. Send name and address to Dept. 38:

L. B. LURY CO., 222 4th AVE., NEW YORK 3, N. Y.

### ADD to Your INCOME with LEATHER Items!

Profit by demand for belts, purses, gloves, etc. No experience necessary. Easy to assemble. Instructions with materials. Send 10 cents at once for catalog of 101 money-making ideas.

J. C. LARSON COMPANY, 172 N. Wacker Dr., Chicago 6, Ill.



**STUDY AT HOME FOR PERSONAL SUCCESS AND LARGER EARNINGS.** 30 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payment. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!

**AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW**  
Dept. 64-B, 448 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

## STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogus Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 66 years.

Beal, N. Bogus, Dept. 2997, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.



### Train Your Own HORSES!

Colts—Stock Horses—Circus Horses  
Gift Show Horses—Write for FREE BOOK  
**ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION**  
Box G-111, Tazewell, Calif.



## INVENTORS

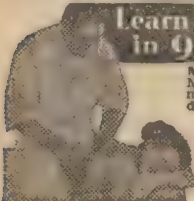
Learn how to protect your invention. Specially prepared "Patent Guide" containing detailed information concerning patent protection and procedure with "Record of Invention" form will be forwarded to you upon request—without obligation.

**CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON**

Registered Patent Attorneys

726-K District National Bldg. Washington 8, D. C.

### Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home



**MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50**—Many Swedish Massage graduates make \$50, \$75 or even more per week. Larger full time income from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE NOW! The College of Swedish Massage  
Dept. 795B, 300 E. Ohio St., Chicago 34

found himself gripping a chair. He splintered it over Ramer's head. The man went down, hitting the floor hard. Eben's breath came fast and then he heard a muttered curse and the man on the floor fired. The bullet spun Eben around, but it did not knock him down. The next one, he figured, would. He slammed into the stove and his hand touched the pan of hot grease. He grabbed it up and flung it toward the spot from where the shot had come.

A man screamed in pain and Eben knew that he hadn't missed. He leaned against the wall, waiting. He heard a whimpering sound and footsteps retreating. He wanted to follow, but blood was running down his side and he was getting mighty light-headed. He stumbled over to the table and sat down in a chair and laid his head down on his arms.

He heard Mollie calling his name and he wondered why she couldn't talk a little softer. Other folks were yelling and the sound of their voices was coming closer. Then they were in the room and someone had lit a lamp and Mollie was fussing over him and he could dimly make out Perry Weatherford's face.

He figured he was going to die in a minute. The thought of that didn't bother him much, but he had to tell them. "Ramer," he managed to get out, and then the room turned upside down.

When he came to, he saw Doc Beldon rolling down his sleeves while he talked to Mollie. The doc said, "Sure, he'll be all right. Give him a couple of days."

And then the marshal came into the room and grinned when he saw that Eben was awake. He came over to the bed. "I got him, Eben; found him in his hotel room, smearing salve on his face where that hot grease hit him. He made a grab for his gun and I had to kill him."

Eben raised himself up a little off the pillow. His heart had come up into his throat and he tried to swallow it back down. "Did—did Ramer talk any before he died?"

Perry Weatherford shook his head. "No, he never said a word."

Eben looked squarely into the young lawman's eyes and he knew the man was lying like hell. But he also knew that his secret was safe.

He lay back and, surprisingly, felt pretty good. He looked at Mollie and he said, "What I want right now is a glass of sweet milk and a big hunk of apple pie."

Mollie considered it. She said, "I can't bake enough for you and all those hungry Texans."

Eben screwed up his face. "To hell with the Texans," he said, "I want some apple pie."

He got it.



## THE DUDE GROWS UP

(Continued from page 104)

for the first time that he was sitting on the floor with his back to an overturned card table. His side was burning and there was a shocking pain in his shoulder. He decided that it was too much bother to sit up, and let his body slide sideways to the floor. Darkness was coming down all around him, and through it he could hear Jim shouting for whisky and thought it a funny time to be buying a drink, and then someone was trying to pour hellfire and brimstone down his throat.

He sat up, choking.

"You all right now?" the cowboy asked.

"Fine," he said weakly, trying to smile.

"The sawbones'll be here in a minute," Jim said.

"Did—how about Connors and—"

"Dead," Jim said. "By God, I never saw such shootin' nor such damn foolishness—you wantin' to take those three all alone."

"I didn't know about the one at the end of the bar."

"That'll teach you not to try to crowd out a pardner," Jim said sternly. Then he leaned over. "I woulda bet if it was my hide and not just yores, you'd come in shootin'," he said. "Reckon I'da won."

"No," Rod said. He knew it was true. He could ride back to the Lazy B now like a man. Lying there waiting for the doctor, the smashed bone in his arm hurting every time he breathed, a quiet smile came on his face. For the first time in the long hateful winter, he was happy.



## AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL

**SEND NO MONEY.** Just mail the coupon for a complete set of 4 Big, Thick Auto Books, 20th Edition. Over 2700 Pages! Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

### MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

[A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.]

Vocational Publishers Since 1898

### CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

**4 BIG, THICK VOLUMES** Over 2700 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel Engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A531

Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

I would like to examine your 4-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you \$2 and pay the balance at the rate of only \$3 a month until \$24.80 has been paid. Please include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....  
Address .....  
City ..... State .....  
Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employment, name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.



## WATCH & CLOCK REPAIRING

**LEARN AT HOME IN YOUR SPARE TIME!** ... Prepare for a happy future, with security—and quality for a good job NOW. A fascinating and thorough self-instruction training in American and Swiss watches and clocks. Special section on alarm clock repairs. Fast-growing field. Satisfaction is guaranteed. Success Catalog Free. NELSON CO., 1139 S. Wabash, Dept. L-05, Chicago 5, Ill.



## TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

**GET QUICK, amazing relief** by placing Dent's Tooth Gum or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Follow directions. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared. Ask your druggist for package. Keep handy for children, too.

## DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS

(25¢)

## If an INVENTOR BELIEVES HE HAS AN INVENTION

a search of the most pertinent prior U. S. Patents should be made and a report obtained relative to its patentability. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

## McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON

Registered Patent Attorneys  
350-G Victor Building Washington 1, D. C.

**BICYCLE REPAIRS**

**FARM IMPLEMENTS**

**SHOP WORK**

**HOME APPLIANCES**

**AUTOMOBILE REPAIRS**

# Now A DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY INDUSTRIAL WELDER

## IDEAL for AUTO-HOME APPLIANCE-FARM REPAIRS

**DESIGNED TO DO HIGH GRADE WELDING INEXPENSIVELY!**

Maintenance Men; Farmers; Mechanics; Machine Shops; Foundries; Auto, General Repair and Job Welding Shops; all using the DYNAMIC find it so indispensable and useful that they cannot afford to be without it. If inexperienced you can easily learn to do a variety of high grade welding jobs by following the practical, simplified operating and welding instructions furnished. Once you see a DYNAMIC in operation, you won't want to be without it. Its simplicity will amaze you. In a year the DYNAMIC only costs you about 6¢ a day. Helmet, rods, cables, holder and operating instructions, etc., furnished.

### Saves You Valuable Time and Money!

This portable industrial transformer type Dynamic Welder easily carried right to the job, can be operated from any convenient, properly wired 110 Volts, 60 Cycle Line—has 3 metallic & carbon arc welding heat stages—does work you would think only possible with a larger more expensive machine. Can also be supplied for 220 volt, 60 cycle operation & other voltages & cycles at slight additional cost. Works on Iron, Steel, Brass, Bronze and other metals.

**DYNAMIC WELDER CO., 13 E. 23rd St., NW, Chicago 16, Ill.**

**ONLY \$28.50.**

**COMPLETE**

**Available Now**

**IMMEDIATE DELIVERIES**

Write Today for Particulars

**GET DETAILS on our 10 day Trial Offer.**

Member Chicago Association of Commerce.



# How To Relieve Bronchitis

Creomulsion relieves promptly because it goes right to the seat of the trouble to help loosen and expel germ laden phlegm, and aid nature to soothe and heal raw, tender inflamed bronchial mucous membranes. Tell your druggist to sell you a bottle of Creomulsion with the understanding you must like the way it quickly allays the cough or you are to have your money back.

## CREOMULSION

for Coughs, Chest Colds, Bronchitis

**Now CHEAP OIL BURNER**  
FOR HEATING AND COOKING STOVES—FURNACES  
HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS  
WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL

NO MORE SHOVELING COAL  
OR ASHES. Sensational Fuelizer  
Starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap  
No. 1 Furnace Oil, also Range, Heater,  
Tractor Distillate, Kerosene and like  
oils into oil heat—one of the quickest,  
hottest fires known. LIFETIME GUARANTEE. \$1.00 Bonus Offer for Testing.  
We will let you try it in your own  
stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big profits QUICK. Be first. Send in your name today for details and cash in on the tremendous demand for this Amazing Invention.

NORTHWEST MFG. CO., 604-P, Mitchell, S. Dak.



## High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H949, Drexel at 56th, Chicago 37

## Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking." National Baking School, 1315 Mich. Ave., Dept. 1939, Chicago 5

**LAW**

STUDY AT HOME FOR PERSONAL SUCCESS AND LARGER EARNINGS. 30 years expert instruction—over 105,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. G.I. Approved. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW! AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW Dept. 84-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 22, Ill.

**OH BOY! FIREWORKS!**

Rich Bros.' All-America Prewar Quality ASSORTMENT. Over 200 pieces including 100 2" Salutes, Cherry Flash Bombs, Flitter Krackers, Comet, Whistle Bomb, 2 Shot Repeaters, Buzz Bomb, Whistle Devil, Humdingers, Fountains, Roman Candles, Aerial Bombs, Sparklers, PLUS 12 Packages Chinese Firecrackers including some of the FAMOUS ZEBRA BRAND. FREE PUNK!

|              |         |                |        |
|--------------|---------|----------------|--------|
| Retail Value | \$10.35 | Yours For Only | \$4.95 |
|--------------|---------|----------------|--------|

**RICH BROS. FIREWORKS CO.**

Dept. E Box 514 Sioux Falls, S. D.  
Shipped By Express Only. None sent C.O.D. Enclose M.O. or Check. Name nearest Express office. Print name and address plainly.

Many other assortments and displays. Send for FREE catalog. Write for FREE Cap and Pistol circular.

(Continued from page 55)

"That fool is stark, staring crazy, Buckner!" he yelled, pointing a finger at Johnny. "To hell with your five hundred dollars!"

He slammed spurs into the mare and raised a streak of dust leaving Pine City. The grin washed out of Buckner's face. Keg Dunlop swore throatily. Johnny heard the men pour out of the Eagle saloon and spread out around him.

A silence built up. "I reckon Cheyenne said enough, Buckner," Johnny called across the street. "You was paying him five hundred to down me. You're yellow, Buckner—you ain't got the guts to make it just between you and me—or maybe anybody else. You're done hereabouts. All you can do is sell an' ride out."

Keg Dunlop roared an oath, and his big hand darted gunward. But Sheriff Brodney's voice stopped him.

"Keep your hand off that gun, Keg! You too, Hamp—and Bo. Johnny, don't waste good buckshot on skunks."

A cry of rage tore past Buckner's lips. His hand swooped downward, his gun lifted and blasted. Johnny stared at the man, stunned. Buckner screamed and cursed and ran down the hotel porch steps, straight across the street toward Johnny. His gun was spewing lead and flame.

Something hit Johnny in the leg and knocked him to the ground. Only then did he snap out of it and swing up the barrel of the shotgun. But before he could pull trigger, another gun spoke beside him.

Slade Buckner stumbled and caught himself. He moaned once, and clapped both hands to his chest and then slid full length in the middle of the street. Johnny switched his gaze to the three men on the porch, but Keg and his two companions were already moving toward their horses, their hands held away from their guns.

Sheriff Brodney was blowing smoke from his gun muzzle. Hands picked Johnny up, carried him indoors.

"It's like I told you, sheriff," Johnny said a while later, after the doctor had dug the bullet out of his leg. "A man that's fighting for what he thinks—"

Sheriff Brodney cast a begging glance at Beth Adams.

"Can't you shut him up?" the sheriff pleaded. "That durn preaching of his—I don't want to hear it again. I been fightin' fer them things all my life. It's just that I don't like to see another man make a durn fool of himself whilst he's still young."

Beth laughed. She went over to the bed and bent over and shut Johnny up.



"I don't wear the pants,  
but I buy 'em, and..."

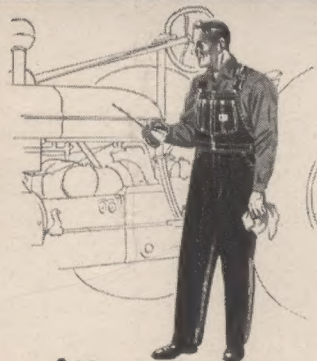
# Lee

1948 models  
are here"

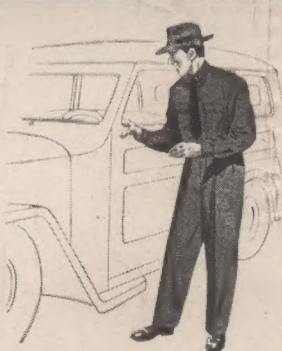
Buy LEE Work Clothes . . . at  
Leading Stores Coast-to-Coast



**T H E R E ' S   A   L E E   F O R   E V E R Y   J O B !**



**Lee** Jelt Denim Overalls



**Lee** Matched Shirts and Pants



**Lee** Boys' Riders and Overalls

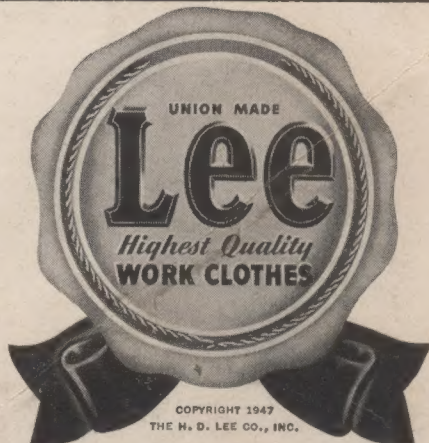
"Like a lot of wives, I buy my husband's work clothes and I'm glad to get all the extra value features in the 1948 models, that make Lee Work Clothes so outstanding.

It's no surprise to us that, for eight straight years, Lee has won first place in a nation-wide preference poll\* . . . or that Lee leads the next brand by 6-to-1."

"Nation-wide survey conducted by a prominent publisher on the question: "What brand of overalls do you prefer?" Lee Jelt Denim Overalls led eight straight years . . . the last two years by 6-to-1 over the next brand.

**THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, INC.**

Kansas City, Mo. • Minneapolis, Minn. • Trenton, N. J.  
San Francisco, Calif. • South Bend, Ind. • Salina, Kans.



COPYRIGHT 1947  
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

**THE WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES**



*Come on in ...  
it's warm inside*

**the new  
fully automatic**

# Motorola

**CAR HEATER**



## **POSITIVE HEAT SELECTOR, THERMOSTAT CONTROLLED**

Fast, constant heat. Heats in a minute or less! Maintains pre-selected heat constantly.



## **ALL THE HEAT YOU WANT**

So powerful it produces sufficient heat to keep an average size room comfortably WARM.



## **HEATS WHEN THE ENGINE IS OFF**

Operates independently of engine and fuel pump. Does not affect idling of engine.



## **EASY TO INSTALL IN ALL CARS**

Fits every make and model car—even those with automatic transmission.



Consult your classified telephone directory  
for your nearest Motorola Radio dealer.

**MOTOROLA, INC. • CHICAGO 51, ILL.**

## **TWO MODELS, FOR COWL-MOUNT**

## **AND UNDERSEAT INSTALLATION**



Both models engineered for thorough air circulation. Both have efficient defroster-blower system.

**BY THE MAKERS OF THE FAMOUS  
MOTOROLA CAR RADIOS**

# Motorola

**GASOLINE  
CAR HEATER**